

Hidden

Disco Shop Girl

Star Wars

Complete



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Summary

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Description:

ROTS AU: Anakin is woken from his dream before it can warn him of his fate. Without that fear hanging over him he feels a disturbance in the force, and chooses to leave before it can manifest itself. Anakin–Padmé, Obi–Wan

Chapter 1

Hidden

Author: Disco Shop Girl

Summary: ROTS AU: Anakin is woken from his dream before it can warn him of his fate. Without that fear hanging over him he feels a disturbance in the force, and chooses to leave before it can manifest itself. Anakin–Padmé, Obi–Wan

Disclaimer: They're not my characters, or my worlds, and half of it isn't even my situations. I just put (some) of the words in their mouths.

Anakin watched Padmé draw her hood back up over her carefully constructed hair.

"Will you be home soon?" her voice came quietly from the darkness that now concealed her face.

Anakin's mind flashed forward to just what they would be doing once he got home. His body couldn't help but jump unhelpfully at the arousing image of being tangled up with her. In his chest his heart pitter-pattered a little louder at the prospect. He ached to be with her.

Not bothering to restrain himself he quickly dipped deep into her cloak and gave her a further brief kiss. Sighing he pulled away before she could complain. Oh to be able to kiss her once more. The warmth of it filled him pleasantly, set his fingertips tingling.

"I hope I'm not more than a few minutes behind you. Go."

Her hand reached out and brushed against his chest. The gesture was simple, but meant the world to Anakin. It conveyed her love, her unwavering trust and faith in him. And it also conveyed her possession. He belonged to her. He had no reason to deny it, he didn't even want to, he *rejoiced* because he belonged to the most fulfilling feeling in the galaxy. Padmé.

He didn't stand and watch as she slipped behind a column, moving away from him with stealth. He turned back to his duty and caught up with the senators for whom he would play Poster Man once more.

Obi-Wan cleared his mind as he relaxed back against the shuttle's utilitarian bench. Being back in the calm of Coruscant could almost unnerve a man. Sieges, battles, daring rescues, battles with Sith Lords, the recent past had had it all. It had been... exhausting.

Even Anakin, who only needed to hear mention of a battle to light up had seemed to tire. In fact, the boy had been longing for some time to be back in the peace of the temple. Perhaps it had been wrong to abandon him to the gossip mongers. The politicians and the news crews.

He felt a little guilty. Even as he sat there, letting his aching body take pleasure in the almost foreign feeling of complete stillness. It giggled at him like the twinge in his lower

back. Not entirely at the forefront of his mind, but there and on his conscience. He should have been standing shoulder to shoulder with Anakin now, as in all their confrontations.

Shrugging it off Obi-Wan told himself he was being ridiculous, that if the boy could pass his trials, decapitate a Sith Lord after such a short time as a Knight, then he could surely face a few questions from holocrews.

He stood up as the shuttle drew close to the temple. Yes, of course Anakin could handle it alone. Surely it would take twice as long, as Anakin did the work for both of them, but he was a Jedi, he could handle anything. Fair enough, Anakin had been desperately longing for a return to Coruscant for weeks, his focus dwindling as time had continued to pass, but a few more hours would not hurt him.

The doors parted in front of Obi-Wan, and he tried to be light-hearted as he stepped off the transport. Unfortunately, guilt doesn't allow one to be light-hearted, no matter how inconsequential the matter.

Grunting at himself about going soft in his old age, Obi-Wan crossed the plaza. Begrudgingly he stepped into the open doors of an identical shuttle which pointed in the direction he'd just come from. Apparently today it was to be *Poster Men*.

Anakin's face did not register the shock he felt as Obi-Wan appeared at his side and diverted some of his attention. Thankfully, he drew some of the questions to him too and left Anakin a little freer.

He continued talking of the spectacular crash landing, the battle, the war — all to the rescued Chancellor as a handful of hovering camera droids watched on. But he had to wonder why his fellow Jedi had returned.

Anakin's eyes briefly drifted to where Padmé had not long ago pressed herself behind a column, waiting for him with her breathtaking news. Surely Obi-Wan did not suspect?

"No I'm afraid Grievous lives to fight another day," he was appropriately contrite as he allowed the impromptu, highly visible press opportunity to continue.

It droned on without his full attention, however. Obi-Wan had ensured that. He could not have returned simply to relieve Anakin of his burden? Had he seen Padmé? Had Obi-Wan felt the spike in excitement the mere second eyes had been laid on the senator?

Anakin suspected *something* had tipped his master off, though he wasn't sure. He *would* be doubly careful to protect against revealing their secret in the future. Still, his natural curiosity could never be repressed it would seem — why was Obi-Wan here?

A half hour of grateful appreciation and hero worship later and he finally got his chance to ask as the two of them were left alone.

"I thought you could use some help. You've seemed quite tired," Obi-Wan explained with a smile.

Anakin's mind whispered a quiet *blast* as Obi-Wan automatically led the way to where the regularly timed transport back to the Jedi temple was just lowering itself to the pavement.

So long for his few minutes he'd promised Padmé. At this rate he wouldn't return to her for a number of hours. It was like Obi-Wan had a sense for when he was about to once again break one of the very tenets they lived by, and had showed up to prevent his transgression.

He stepped up into the transport, momentarily ducking his head against the doorway then sinking gratefully into a seat beside his friend. He wanted to be going in the exact opposite direction — away from austerity and rational calm and the Jedi temple to the luxurious passion that awaited him in a large apartment midway up 500 Republica. But he took comfort in the chance to be off his feet.

Today had been a very long day with a very bad start. The four hours in hyperspace before blasting into the battle above Coruscant had been considerably more taxing than usual. Perhaps because of the delights that awaited him on planet? And he hadn't even then known of the added surprise she held inside her.

Whatever the reason, he relaxed in the comfort of a brief respite and allowed his mind to form a quick plan.

"I know how much you've been looking forward to returning," Obi-Wan noted beside him.

Playing right into Anakin's hands. Things could not be more perfect if he'd just pulled a mind trick on the weakest of beings and put the words into his mouth himself.

"I need some time to myself, to meditate and refocus. My connection to the force has been out of balance for quite some time," he fluidly replied to the Jedi master.

Obi-Wan faced forward thoughtfully but seemed to take Anakin's words at their face value.

"Perhaps we can share a meal before I return to my room? I think I need to eat first and foremost, but after that it could be some days before my mind is clear."

"Very well. I would enjoy a meal, and shall spread word that you're not to be disturbed until you emerge on your own," Obi-Wan kindly offered.

He sent Anakin the briefest curious look, but turned away again. Anakin decided it would probably be best to ignore his friend. After all, he was lying, what did he have to defend himself against that questioning look?

A *brief* meal and then he would take the long way to his chambers, making sure to be seen by as many Jedi as he could. After that he would sneak out without being seen and hopefully leave the impression that he was meditating, and wished to be undisturbed.

Yes, it would buy him a handful of days, at the very least.

Half an hour after being left to his own devices, Anakin set the lock on his door and crept away.

It was mealtime and the bulk of resident Jedi would be eating in the large halls on the far side of the building. With this in mind Anakin tried to keep to the corridors near the meditation rooms which should be abandoned.

Should. Of course Obi-wan had to appear out of one just after he'd walked past it.

"Anakin?" he questioned in surprise.

Blast. It is like he literally has a homing beacon on me Anakin's mind protested as he froze then turned.

"Obi-wan," he greeted calmly.

"I thought you were going to meditate?"

If he was going to do this, he was going to do it right. Far too many months he'd been away from Padmé. He should at least have a few days to re-energise in her presence before the Jedi could claim his attention once more. Up to a week's solitary meditation wouldn't seem out of sorts for those returning from the battle front. To those who were more familiar with Anakin it might seem suspicious, but he *had* been gone five months.

No, he was going to do this properly.

"I couldn't settle and decided I needed a walk to calm my head and relax. I'll be back in a few hours," Anakin fluidly informed his friend.

Obi-Wan nodded, standing to watch him leave.

Knowing that he needed to spend his time with Padmé before he exploded from not being with her, he continued his walk.

He *would* have to return in a little while and make an appearance. But then he would get his time with her. And for every moment Obi-Wan insisted on delaying it, he would add another day.

With that thought happily in mind he hurried for her apartment.

"M'lady," Anakin greeted her formally as he stepped off the turbolift, nodding his head.

He looked past her warily, like he always did, trying to gauge if anyone else was in the apartment and, more importantly, listening in.

"No one's here. Where have you been?" she greeted happily.

Her hands immediately drew him down for the long kisses she had denied him earlier. His feverish hands sought to clasp her tight with a new care that had not existed previously. He didn't pull *too* forcefully this time.

Although he did continue to grin as he feasted on her mouth.

The baby her heart sung to her joyfully. *He doesn't want to hurt it.*

"Obi-Wan came looking for me. I had to distract him. Padmé I've missed you."

She started stepping backwards with her kisses, drawing him to follow her.

His cloak slipped over his shoulders and fell to the ground with a heavy thud under the guidance of her practised fingers.

“After, we need to talk,” he mumbled into her mouth as he stopped to draw her in closer.

To put his hands on her small waist and kiss her as even he had not dared to out in the open. Like a husband home from the war about to join his much-missed wife in her bed.

A kiss from which she tugged away.

“About what, is it serious?” she wanted to know.

She didn’t have much will to fight him as he sunk to her neck. She let her hands drift over his back and continued to slowly move back towards their more private quarters.

“Yes and no. About the baby.”

“What about the baby?” she immediately demanded, suspicion filling her.

She froze in his arms and pushed him back so that he was forced to look at her.

His soft laughter did not allay her fears. So instead he took her hand in his and more speedily led her to their bedroom.

“Don’t be afraid — it’s not bad Padmé! I just want to talk about how our lives are going to change.”

He wasn’t helping. She was for the first time in her life starting to really fear something. The unknown. Their lives could not possibly continue as they did now once the baby was born. And she couldn’t foresee even one possible path they could take. This hadn’t been a problem before he came home because she’d been so focused on telling him. But now...

“How do you think our lives are going to change?” she asked him doubtfully.

He stepped through the doorway and his face lit up in a grin at the sight of their bed. Ready and waiting.

His pulled her into his arms and started kissing at her unresponsive lips once more.

“I think everything will be alright and we’ll be together. I haven’t thought about it beyond that. Because all I can think about is *you*,” he told her honestly.

She relaxed a little in his arms at his response. Then curled her hands over the strong muscles outlined beneath his shirt. His hands wandered her body amorously and she took the opportunity to savour his strong embrace.

Her months of missing him seemed to all come to naught as she cherished the rough skin of his chin with her lips.

“Padmé,” he groaned under his breath as she reached for the clasp on his utility belt.

Then she understood his hands weren’t simply reacquainting themselves with her body, they were searching for the hidden access seam. And they’d just found it.

Long after the afternoon sun had sunk below the horizon, Anakin crept from her bed to return to the temple. He purposely stopped to talk to as many acquaintances as he could in a

path that vaguely led towards his quarters. It took over three hours, but once he'd done it he felt satisfied with his cover.

This time when he snuck back out he kept his feelings stretched well out in front of him and, by some miracle, managed to avoid Obi-Wan. It was with a sigh of relief that he stepped outside the Jedi temple and hurried away towards a public transport, without a single glance back.

Evading any querying eyes tonight didn't seem to be as easy as usual. Maybe it was because more people recognised his face. Or maybe it was because concentrating on making them forget they'd seen him was that much harder with something else on your mind. Something big. Huge. Wonderful.

A baby. Padmé was going to have a baby.

He forced himself to take a deep, calming breath as he slipped into the turbolift unnoticed. A quick punch of a security code and it was heading uninterrupted for Padmé's apartment. Now if only he could calm down.

There were so many questions in his mind, quieted somewhat by spending the afternoon with her, but still there. He understood very little about what was going to happen, and now felt hopelessly inadequate. Padawan gossip provided his uneducated mind with the absolute basics of how she suddenly had the beginnings of their family inside her. It made his mind shields shoot up lest anyone nearby catch the graphic images. But should he ask her about the rest?

She'd said it was about five months old, the same period of time he'd been away. And with thoughts of being away from her Anakin's mind turned from what they'd created, to where it lived. In Padmé's swollen belly. Padmé.

He grinned as the doors slid open, her presence already washing over him. It calmed his thoughts, relaxed him. And filled him with visions of her, though she was nowhere to be seen.

It was easy to track her down though.

He leant up against the wall, feeling the slightly cooler night air once more. Waiting for her to notice him while he stood and watched her. She was so beautiful. Already in her nightgown and taking down her hair. Perhaps he'd lingered a little too long at the temple. Missed this wondrous site.

His lightsaber made a small banging noise as he leant in the open doorway. She didn't turn but he could feel her smile and it caressed him softly.

"Tell me about when you were gone," she asked, her back still to him.

Finally every hair was free and it tumbled down her back. She reached for a tie and started pulling it back to wear to bed.

But try as he might he couldn't remember much of anything from the last five months. Save

"I missed you," he lamented.

And it was true. Five months. It was the longest time they'd been apart yet. Since they'd been married. And it had hurt like he wouldn't have believed. It almost started to hurt again now, thinking about how much had been happening at home that he'd been missing out on. Not politics, or Jedi business, or even scandal, but this baby. It had totally transformed her while he'd been away. It had started its life and grown so big already. It was so special and his life had changed without him there, and he'd missed it all. And for what — defending Outer Rim settlements? Oh yes, he'd missed her terribly.

"Surely you did more than miss me?" she asked, turning around to smile at him.

He bored his gaze into her with no refuting reply forthcoming. Which made her smile all the brighter.

"Be serious Ani," she laughed.

He watched her hands reach up to tug her hair into its final place. And told her of the torture of having to spend every second thinking about her. She picked up her brush and continued to smile. Last time he came home she would have tried to drag the truth out of him, of dangerous undercover raids and fiercely fought battles that ended with permanent scarring.

But not this time. This time she just smiled serenely up to the stars and continued to brush her hair. Even as he trailed off she didn't force him to continue.

His eyes travelled down from the eyes that always held his attention to the change in Padmé's form. So desperate had he been to stop missing her, when they were together all afternoon, that he hadn't taken the time to truly look at the transformation. And when she had greeted him upon his return, her form had been well-concealed, out in front of prying eyes. Now, all alone, in the safety of nothing but his presence, she wasn't hiding it, and he was paying attention. Her soft, thin nightgown showed that she bulged. Obviously. Low on her body, and prominent to a point that it looked abnormal. All in all she bulged quite perfectly.

Padmé looked down from the stars momentarily, needing to remind herself once more that Anakin was really here.

Safe, well, and he loved her still. Nothing made her happier.

Although the thought of their baby came pretty close. His immediate acceptance, his *enthusiasm* when she'd forced herself to tell him earlier had finally eased her nerves. Previously she'd only thought of the negatives. How they could possibly hope to hide the small creature. But now that he was so delighted, it was like all her own pent up happiness had been released. Everything she'd been refusing to allow herself to feel was escaping from a dam. And plans bubbling with joy for the near and further future could not be stopped from racing through her.

"I want to have our baby back home on Naboo," she told him, almost dreaming the idyllic scenario in her mind.

As she paused in the brushing of her hair she imagined life coming full circle in one retreat. The naivety of her childhood when she'd enjoyed the simple pleasures of the lake country — nothing more than swimming and relaxing in the sun. To fighting so hard against

falling in love with her very young Jedi protector. To marrying the same Padawan who by then could not keep his eyes or his mind from her. To having her own baby, starting her own family, secreted away where no one would know amongst the vast lakes that were so removed from the outside world.

Yes, it would be the perfect place to have their baby. She immediately thought of one of the smaller rooms on the far side, where she'd once hid quietly for hours during a game. The doors that opened onto the young gardens.

Though Anakin had spoken of the need to capture General Grievous, and would not likely be free much longer, she knew he would come to her. He may have to fight, and defend the republic, but he would be there when the baby's time came. And she would be there waiting for him.

"I could go early," she mused gently, her hand passing through her hair with the expensive brush.

Detangling the knots her afternoon locked in the bedroom with Anakin had created.

"And fix up the baby's room."

Yes that smaller room with the herb garden right under its windows was perfect. She could see it now. The curtains opened in the early morning sunlight, vines softening the harshness. In her mind it had already been picked out.

Across the hall there was a handful of larger bedrooms, if memory served correctly. The two of them could change rooms and sleep down there, near the baby. And the ornate furniture of the intimate study would, for now, make way for a nursery. Just like in her own life politics may need to leave her be for a little while.

"I know the perfect spot."

She thought of the sweeping paths and lush plants that twined around each other, connecting the ground floor rooms and eventually leading to the lake. Of the trees that grew tall perfectly, without overbearing. That shaded without blocking the light. Her hand briefly caught once more as she thought of the beauty.

"Right by the gardens," she mused to him.

Her eyes unfocused for a brief moment, and it was almost as though she could see it in front of her. That she was there already.

"You are so beautiful."

Anakin knew that most people, for some reason he didn't quite understand, didn't say such things — but he only spoke the truth. She was so beautiful.

She kept moving, refusing to allow his eyes to settle on one spot. In consequence, his gaze danced over her fervently. Reminding him that his imagination had not gotten out of control while he was away. How he remembered her was nothing compared to how beautiful she was

standing in front of him. Right here, right now. Her mind far away and dreaming of such details as where her baby would sleep.

His gaze flicked down to her belly again. It was so odd to see it there. And was part of the reason why his imaginings had not lived up to expectation. Because his imaginings had never thought to add such a physical manifestation of their love to her body.

Her beauty didn't come from the fact that she was his though. Her beauty came from her. How such simple thoughts could please someone who had lived all her life surrounded by opulence and wealth. How the thought of being hidden away in Naboo's lake country once more made her happy. Even though every time he'd accompanied her there, it was because they were forced to hide something. Her body from attackers, their precious marriage from Obi-Wan, and now their baby from Jedi. Through all that it still represented peace and tranquillity for her.

Even though she'd have to leave and hide from everything she worked her life for. The senate, the chance to help the galaxy's defenceless, peace. She would give all that up to hide her baby, and let it start its life sleeping in a perfect room.

Yes, she truly was beautiful.

"It's only because I'm so in love," she tried to work around his compliment.

She turned to smile at him, that brush finally nearing completion and his heart swelled at her confession. Love did not make her beautiful. The way he felt about her made him want to clasp his head in agony sometimes, it was so utterly consuming. That she could return his love was what brought it from something akin to infatuation on his part, to overwhelming passion.

"No it's because I'm so in love with you," Anakin insisted, his face lighting up.

I love you his heart sang out in silent joy. She stopped brushing the silver through her hair but had turned her full attention to him now. He was nothing, if not in love with her.

"So love has blinded you?" she trapped him.

He paused, caught. Was she so beautiful because he loved her so? It was hard to separate the two notions, they'd always been one in his mind. She was beautiful even in the dark when she lay softly sleeping by his side. She was beautiful when he was on the Outer Rim, as far from her as he could be. Her presence in his awareness when his eyes were closed in meditation was beautiful.

Was that his love manifesting itself instead?

It was impossible to understand, he decided. But she was beautiful. Had his love blinded him? He would not be able to tell, because he'd never stop loving her enough to see if she was beautiful without being in love with her.

"Well that's not exactly what I meant," he conceded, giving neither option the chance to triumph.

"But it's probably true," she forced upon him and they both laughed.

She collected up her hair things and started to return inside. Even as she was moving towards him, she couldn't help but notice how handsome he'd become. How handsome he'd been when they were married, but even more so as the years had passed.

And now, here, all alone with her, on the verge of starting their family, she had truly never beheld anything more stunning. Though she didn't pretend to understand the force, she could understand how Anakin must feel to sense the feelings of others. Because looking at him right now, casual against the doorway yet his entire focus seemingly centred on herself, she could feel nothing but love. From inside herself and emanating from him.

It was love: pure, and untainted. Innocent in that way Anakin had, where nothing had come between them yet and he truly believed that nothing ever could. Not one thing would stop them from loving each other.

She let herself slow down as she reached him, just as he righted himself and unfolded his arms to hold her.

There were no more words that needed to be said. Right now everything was as he'd said it should be, as she'd refused to dream of. Wonderful.

On their wedding day they had both been plagued by the inherent fault in a Senator marrying so secretly to such a scandalous figure. And a Jedi marrying at all. And the fact that their wedding night would be the last time they saw one another for an unknown amount of time.

But here, now, there was none of that regret. No sense of wrongdoing, no impending sadness. Unlike their wedding day this truly was the happiest day of her life. Though she wouldn't admit that to him at the moment — it would puff him up far too much.

Did it matter if he thought she were beautiful only because he was in love with her? Not one bit. Because the fact remained — he loved her. Just as she loved him. And just... wonderful.

"I'm going to retire," she told him when she finally pulled away and started heading towards her bedroom.

Without having to turn and look she pictured him carrying out a familiar routine. That of the 'first night back'. His hand waving to lock all the doors and set the security systems because he couldn't bare to trail that far behind her that he stopped to do them all manually.

Murmuring a pointed "good night 3P0," which the droid had suddenly started understanding after the first time he'd come to awaken Padmé and been confused by Anakin's presence in her bed. She had a feeling he'd tinkered with the droid's programming, because the command seemed to be limited to Anakin's issuing it.

She turned and saw him lock her bedroom door behind him. Smiling peacefully she settled herself near her pillows on the edge of the bed and bent somewhat awkwardly to slip off her soft house shoes. To be suddenly brought back to his gaze by his hearty laughter.

"It's not that easy anymore," she grinned at him, depositing both shoes on the floor and fumbling with the covers.

"You look so funny!" he continued to laugh.

Hilarious. She looked hilarious. She'd been so lithe and athletic when he left. Now she had trouble reaching her feet with her grown middle. It was hilarious.

And though he laughed at her she just took kindly to his teasing and didn't try to rebuke him. Because she must know how odd it looked to him. That's when it struck him.

She was happier now. Than she'd ever been. All he had to do was love her. And she didn't care that it had made her sick, she didn't care that it had distorted her body. It had obviously made her happier.

Because they'd loved recklessly one night on his last trip home.

He grinned in slight embarrassed remembrance at his own thoughts as he unbuckled his utility belt and placed it on his chair. His chair — just for his clothes. Always empty when he wasn't half naked in her bed. Something that was just for him, in the most intimate space of Padmé's life — her bedroom.

He quickly stripped off as she watched and he felt the warmth of nothing more than her company fill him. No wonder he missed her so much when he was away.

Without needing to be told he slipped into her dressing area and opened the draw full of her nightgowns. Soft, rich fabrics from many worlds. Crafted by top designers whose names he couldn't even fathom. And one rough pair of Jedi sleep pants, tucked in its own place on the side. Where it lived much of the time, unworn.

The nature and habits of their pyjamas spoke of their own lives a little too closely. He yanked the soft, simple, dark clothing from its place and pushed the drawer shut, refusing to think further.

He quickly pulled them on beneath his unbuttoned shirt, a small guard against the cooler night.

"I know I say it every time, but this is so different," Anakin murmured quietly to her as he pulled back the covers and quickly slipped between the blankets.

She didn't reply, just rolled onto her side to study him.

Her fingers came up to caress his cheeks and he sighed, covering them, holding them to him.

"Right here, everything is perfect," he whispered, closed his eyes and suddenly turned his head to place butterfly kisses on each of her fingertips.

She continued her silence and he opened his eyes to her, only to find her in his immediate vision. He let his eyes close again, feeling intensity in one of her simple kisses that outdid anything he'd felt in the last five months.

Unlike all they'd shared that day, this kiss was soft, held no desperation, only the culmination of tranquil love from both. It continued on as thousands of speeders passed by outside, unhurried by anything at all. Eventually Anakin brought a hand up to cup her face when the sweetness got so much that he briefly lost his equilibrium. The feeling of her fingers on his chest and along his scalp was incomparable bliss and he loved it so.

There was not the hunger of their earlier kisses, when both had been so full of deprived lust they'd barely had time to secure the door. But the longing to be joined was always there.

Briefly, Padmé sighed in his mouth then pulled away, rolling onto her back.

Sad though she was to give up Anakin's precious lips, it had to be done. What had been uncomfortable had transformed into pain.

"What is it?" Anakin asked throatily, his eyes not opening beyond half-lidded when she disengaged.

Wriggling around on the bed she moved onto her back.

"Not you. It hurts being on my side," she explained to him.

She could tell that was one justification he did not understand. Sometimes she had to wonder if Jedi masters taught their younglings anything. Because her husband was as naïve as Pooja, more than just some of the time.

"The weight is different, and my back hurts," she clarified softly.

She turned her head slightly to watch his reaction. And briefly had to ponder what he was going to do when this baby decided to make its entrance into the world. His innocence had astounded her on their wedding night, and she was starting to feel that his inexperience there was nothing compared to what lay ahead of them. Especially if he couldn't conceive that simply carrying more all of the time would eventually begin to stress her body.

But above it all she loved him. And his response to the growing niggles, aches and pains just reaffirmed that when he said

"Oh... well can I still kiss you?"

You are so sweet Ani her mind sighed.

"Of course you can still kiss me," she whispered back, threading one hand through his hair and pulling his lips over.

They murmured unthinking words as their kisses became more intimate. But now Padmé wanted more than just to kiss him. The desire that had been put to rest earlier in the evening was back full force. Having Anakin here in person, after so many months — *months* — without him was far too... intoxicating. She slipped one hand over his hard chest and round to his sculpted back, letting the fabric of his open shirt caress her forearms as she held him. Pulled him closer.

Anakin groaned as he seemed to release control and even as he was moving closer to her, on top of her, she was pushing the shirt from his shoulders. Revealing his broad chest and back to her eagerly wondering hand.

She murmured back to him to not get so excited, as his shirt briefly tangled in his mechanical arm before being tossed across the room.

"I can't help it. I love you," his words seemed to come back as he cupped her face hungrily.

Which she more than reciprocated. Both her arms now wrapped around him and pulled him in a half-roll so that he could lie on top of her. So that she could kiss him even more deeply, and be free to run her hands up and down his back. Put them in his longer hair and tug his head in even closer. Touch him everywhere possible.

Feel him against her once more. She had an insatiable appetite for him, and the odd perception that perhaps, were the separatists to be brought around and the Jedi order vastly expanded, then just perhaps they could do this forever.

So having him say "Mmmmm, wait Padmé," was not exactly top of her list of things to hear at that very moment.

The baby. He didn't want to hurt the baby. And something so small it could fit into such a small region as her belly surely wouldn't take too kindly to being crushed by the weight of a large Jedi Knight.

Luckily she seemed to understand as he hovered over her, looking down towards where it nestled inside of her nervously.

"You won't. Just—" she propped herself up on her elbows and looked down for a moment. "Rest your weight on your knees."

He followed her gaze and rearranged himself once more, half straddling her hips. He would have laughed again — their passion had never been interrupted by practicality before. Except he was far too focused on returning to that passion as quickly as possible to be laughing.

"Now I can't feel you at all," she led him.

And he was happy to follow. He quickly rejoined his mouth back to hers, lowering his body gently so he could feel her but not hurt her. Resting his weight on his elbows so he could tease her soft cheeks with his palms.

His hunger for her was starting to consume him in its entirety.

Anakin twitched in his sleep. Although unconscious, the force never stopped speaking to him. Right now it was whispering something. He strained to hear, not able to make out the words.

For just a moment, it was as if his eyes were being opened up. Padmé was somewhere, in pain. Crying out.

Anakin suddenly popped his eyes open and reconciled the beginnings of a dream with reality.

He could hear Padmé, and she was in pain all right. Throwing up. Extremely worried he quickly climbed out of bed, tugging his shirt back on. He hadn't noticed she was sick. She was fine just this evening, maybe it was something she'd eaten. Did the baby suffer when she did?

With all these thoughts on his mind he found her momentarily. In silence he caught the rest of her hair and swept it back behind her. Lovingly running his fingers over her scalp but not saying a word. Alarmed, he watched on as she must have emptied the contents of most of her stomach.

No, this definitely couldn't be good. For her or their little one. He ached to see her unwell, it made him feel useless as she bent over in pain. To feel her discomfort throbbing in the force made it even worse.

Finally she settled back on her knees, leaning her head back tiredly. He let her soft curls fall away from his hands, back to their original position. Luckily she'd tied some of it back before she went to sleep.

Without a word he rinsed a cloth out then tenderly applied it to the back of her sweating neck.

"You must feel terrible," he murmured sympathetically, sinking to the floor beside her.

His hand reached up to the counter and drew a glass of water, handing it over to her.

"Thank you," she whispered, sending him a sad smile.

Anakin watched on tenderly. She rinsed her mouth out as best she could, then collapsed back to the floor. She was so obviously exhausted, poor Padmé. After their rather taxing hours together, they both needed their sleep. His fingers itched to trace her cheeks, flushed and sweating. But he kept his hands from her, she was obviously too hot as it was.

"It was probably something you ate," he reasoned quietly.

Not actually knowing what she'd had for dinner he couldn't be sure. However, it had come on after she'd gone to sleep, so it had to be something she'd ingested just before he returned. Satisfied with his own logic he didn't see her eyes widened at him. He felt her disbelief though.

"Anakin it's morning sickness," her hoarse voice informed him.

Frowning, he stared at the wall in front of him. It wasn't morning. Her incredulous tone brought feelings of inadequate naivety bubbling back up to the surface. He loved her so much, but when he was with her she left him feeling like he'd missed a single class while he was growing up that explained the simple facts of life. Of course they were facts a Jedi had no use for, but he did. And he assumed whatever this one was, it was baby-related.

He wasn't wrong.

"It's too much of a hormone in my body, I think. The baby's doing it to me," she explained quietly.

Reaching out, she took his hand and gave it a brief squeeze.

He feared the near future for them. Padmé was going to need someone who understood, and that was definitely not him. He was going to be a terrible father.

As he watched her climb to her feet and start to clean up, he made a silent vow. Tomorrow, he would find out as much as he could about human pregnancy. Because it was becoming obvious just how much knowledge he lacked. And he disliked the feeling of being a youthful adolescent who still didn't understand how the world worked.

Tomorrow.

Right now, his eyes settled on Padmé as she started returning to bed. Without a word he followed her, tracing his eyes over her. Middle of the night, having just thrown up, she was still the most beautiful person he had ever laid eyes on.

No man would ever be so lucky as he was, he acknowledged that. No other man would ever receive the love of Padmé Amidala like he did. And he would never give her cause to stop loving him. He would worship her all her days.

"Come to bed," she entreated when he stood admiring her too long.

He hurried back under the covers and back to his lover's side. While she quickly fell asleep again he lay back, pondering the warning in the force he'd begun to feel before. It lingered, even now. He wondered if it been there just since his dream, or if it had been there before that. There was a vague notion that nothing had been right since his encounter with Dooku. Or had it been making planetfall on Coruscant?

Anakin let a small smile creep up onto his lips as Padmé's eyes opened sleepily.

"Hi," he whispered, the soft light of the rising sun drifting across her tangled hair.

She gave him the barest of grins then reached out for his hand without a word.

He lay beside her in silence, fixing her with an intense stare that was powerfully returned.

"I should get up and," she finally started but he raised their entwined hands to her lips to hush her.

"I want us to go back to Naboo. Now," he said quietly.

Her eyes widened in alarm but he continued before she could interrupt.

"Something is brewing. Something elsewhere, elusive. Like a faarlij"

he murmured, referring to a Nubian children's treat they'd once shared, that continued to grow once exposed to air if you did not slurp down the sugary bubble fast enough, until it exploded over you in a gooey mess.

"I feel like its here, but if we leave it won't explode all over us."

She smiled sadly, kissed his knuckles and drew their tangled mass of fingers away enough for her to speak.

“The war isn’t over and Palpatine is asking for executive power over the budgeting committee’s heads. I can’t leave now, and since when have you wanted to run from a fight?”

He grinned and tugged their hands to his own lips. She got a long, slow, open-mouthed kiss that made many promises on her open palm.

“If we were to leave everything else behind, someone else would start eating until it was all gone. If we stay, we could never eat fast enough.”

Her eyebrows turned down at him and he knew he’d perhaps taken the metaphor a little too far. But it accurately described what he felt. In the force, and in his heart.

Something larger was happening, surrounding the Senate, the Jedi — the attempt to kidnap the Chancellor was too ridiculous in its inception, he was amazed Count Dooku had let it get as far as it had. Although he didn’t know what it was, he understood the feeling inside him. The one he’d felt in pod races just before the speeder in front of him exploded and sent shrapnel flying his way. The one that said *duck now! Get out of the way!*

In his heart he also knew this to be the truth. His feelings as he’d taken Dooku’s life had been conflicted in a way they hadn’t been for quite some time. Continuing his own involvement in the war would be dangerous until he took the time to understand what was happening inside himself.

And then there was the baby. The swelling Padmé’s belly now had held so much promise. She should be somewhere beautiful, homely, *safe*. Where he could love her unconditionally. A soft sense at the back of his mind he’d never quite heard before told him she was going to need that for a little while to come. That devoted and undivided attention only his fondness could give her.

“Is this just first night home over-eagerness or do you truly believe something ominous awaits us?” she asked carefully.

Her eyes bored into his, demanding his truthful answer. Because she didn’t want to hear what he knew to be true in his heart.

“For our safety we should leave,” he reiterated quietly.

She rolled onto her back and turned her eyes away from him. Obviously trying to gauge her own options. She didn’t want to leave just yet, that was clear and somewhat understandable. Her obligations to her people would always be her first priority. To serve the interests of the people who had elected her, because they trusted her unfailingly and she would never abuse that trust.

But he could also see she liked the idea of the two of them. On her home planet, tucked away, perhaps up at the lake but then again maybe elsewhere, just waiting for their baby to arrive. Doing all the things they had never got a chance to do because of the war, their positions in the public eye. The demands of their respective lives.

“What about the Jedi, those that are in need of protection?” she asked quietly.

“Dooku is dead, Grievous will soon be dealt with, already the Jedi are returning to strength.”

Her hand slipped under the covers, and for a moment he eyed her very curiously. His eyes followed the progress of her fingers, as they created moving lumps under the blanket. From his position tucked up on his pillow he finally he saw them come to a stop, right over her stomach.

Lighting up, he sat up and threw the covers back, making her shriek in surprise as he bounced.

“And then there is baby Skywalker to think of!” he babbled, grinning up at her.

“Baby Skywalker?” she smiled indulgently, though her attention seemed to drift in a pleasurable haze at the sound of it.

He hesitated a moment, eyes focused on her perfect, still hand. Then he took a deep breath, reached out his right hand, and lay it on her stomach, covered her fingers.

With that contact he could feel nothing but overwhelming love for everything that was right here. Padmé. The way her belly swelled with the assurance of hope growing steadily inside. Padmé. Padmé. He was complete in her presence.

“What’s gotten into you?” she smirked up at him.

Her other hand came up to cover his and he couldn’t help but light up.

“I’m going to Naboo and life is going to be very perfect for a little while.”

He looked at her meaningfully and waited for her response. Desperately hoping that it would be for him. Praying that she wouldn’t put duty first. Not this time, he didn’t think he could bare it this time. Because he truly sensed nothing good for them if they remained here much longer. That something elusive was almost becoming more tangible by the minute.

“I’ll go with you.”

To be continued...

Chapter 2

Padmé emerged quietly onto the large balcony off her bedroom. The view from the spacious expanse was uninterrupted, and breathtaking. And she wasn't looking more than five metres in front of her.

Anakin was perched on one of the smooth couches. With his hands clasped in his lap and his gaze drifting out towards the Jedi temple he could almost be classed as brooding.

He could feel her, of course. He could always feel her, she knew it. But this time he didn't turn around, and she took the liberty of studying him. His broad shoulders slumped forward just a touch, his hair somehow hanging without falling into his face, his strong arms. It warmed her to have him here. Without even paying attention to her, just having him sitting there, knowing that he was nearby, warmed her heart.

Time was ticking away though.

"I'm off," she called lightly.

Amazingly, he seemed startled. That was unusual, he'd known she was standing here surely? Her chest tightened a little, understanding immediately that he was very troubled.

The look on his face when he turned to her said it all. He tried to hide it but she could read him like an open book.

"I thought you knew I was here," she consoled.

Quickly she moved the distance between them, seating herself by his side. Anakin's eyes turned out towards the city once more.

"Something's wrong," she observed subtly.

It hurt to watch as he shook his head. He wasn't going to tell her. Again. Hadn't they gotten over this? She wanted him to tell her, she knew she could help. Whatever it was. Making him happy was her first priority, and the troubled look he showed now ripped at her.

If it was that bad, then this time she wouldn't stand by. Anakin may have been too proud to admit he needed help, but she had all the patience and time needed to coax it out of him.

"Tell me," she tempted him.

He surprised her by speaking up straight away. Maybe he was growing up more than she'd given him credit for. Because he rarely admitted he couldn't handle a problem on his own. Even when he was in way over his depth.

His soft confession now made her love him all the more.

"What I felt last night, it's getting worse."

Anakin paused and though she'd been on her way out, she didn't hurry him. She just sat at his side and took his worry on. Although she didn't know what it was for yet, it had to be

serious.

“I can’t understand what it means. It’s frustrating.”

His sad eyes drifted to meet hers. With a frown she turned her own eyes to the city. His answer was so cryptic she conceded to herself that there was little true advice she could offer him. But that didn’t mean she was useless.

“Speak to Obi-Wan about it,” she counselled.

Apparently he hadn’t changed that much. His head shook firmly and Padmé smiled understandingly to herself. Apparently he was still too proud to ask his mentor and best friend for help.

As she was trying to think of another solution he for once seemed to dismiss his troubles with no more than a fleeting thought. With mock disapproval he eyed her.

“Where are you going?” he wanted to know.

“Work.”

The look of disgust on his face said it all. If he could have her all to himself and never be physically apart from her again, he probably would. Normally she was almost in agreement with him. Pretending to be sick for a few days and then confining themselves to each other’s presence had always been deemed necessary when he came back. Especially as the periods of time they were apart kept growing.

Anakin seemed to think today would definitely be one of those days. And as much as she wished it herself, she just couldn’t give her day to him. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t object.

“I thought you said you’d come with me,” he murmured, his face falling further.

His eyes were almost accusing in their intensity and Padmé had to take a moment to collect her thoughts. He could be very intimidating, even when he wasn’t trying to be. Although in this case he probably was trying. And it was working.

If only he’d married anyone else she probably would have caved to that look in pure fear of what would happen when you’d upset him.

Padmé couldn’t afford to fear him.

“Of course I’ll come with you, but surely you didn’t mean today?”

He sat up a little taller, gaining height. Her hand was tugged close to his chest and he held it there. Refusing to free her. She longed to understand what this feeling he had was, because it was dictating him like nothing before. He must feel truly threatened if he wanted not only to run away, but to do it with no notice at all.

“I have to go into my office and let people know I’m leaving at the very least,” she tried to persuade him.

Emphatically he shook his head and gave a soft “no.”

“It’s getting more tense by the moment. I want us to leave now.”

“You know I can’t.”

“You agreed Padmé!” he almost exploded, yanking himself away and standing up.

“I agreed to leave, but not like this! Not so fast! What’s wrong Ani?”

She was startled as his hands flew up to his head and clasped at it. He groaned in what seemed almost physical pain.

“I don’t know! That’s why we have to go. I would rather be wrong and embarrassed, even kicked out of the order, than stay and have one of us killed.”

Her back straightened and she glared at him in an almost tangible display of her fear. Something she didn’t do very often. Her life was threatened often enough that she had come to live with it, but now there was another life to think of. One which couldn’t defend itself like Anakin could. And the idea that he might lose her seemed to be torturing him.

In an abrupt display of emotion that gave a glimpse of how tightly wound up he truly was, Anakin fell to his knees in front of her.

“Please Padmé. Let’s just go right now. We’ll just go to your ship and take off.”

He laid his head in her lap and she looked down at him in wonder. Tensions often ran high in her office. The demands of various Senate committees could be excessive and deadlines were always looming. Presently the government was breaking up as systems left and joined the Separatists, leaving everyone on edge.

But in all her days there, watching impassioned speeches and heated, sometimes downright nasty arguments, no one had seemed as desperately sure of destruction waiting so closely for them as Anakin did now.

If she stayed she could continue to try and keep things settled. The galaxy was still managing to hold together, as war ravaged as it was. But Anakin... She looked down into her lap, carefully caressing his head. She’d never seen such anguish from him. Padmé shivered at the memory of his breakdown after his mother had died — even that episode didn’t compare to this. How could she claim she loved him if she left him to suffer like this, so terribly desperately?

Her thoughts flickered to her colleagues she trusted. Mon Mothma. Bail Organa. There were others who were dedicated, would continue to push for peace. While they both had methods and goals that differed from her own, she trusted them. They too could ensure democracy continued to function, even in the restricted form it had now.

The man weeping at her knees did not have so many options. And he was desperately sure that whatever was coming, they needed to escape it.

Anakin, who’d never run from a fight in his life.

“Give me time to pack,” she finally sighed.

He froze against her knees. Did she just agree with him? On something so substantial?

He raised his head to look up, just to be sure he’d heard right. Now she was the one with the sad smile. But her fingers stroked through his hair fondly and he knew she’d chosen him.

Over the entire galaxy, in this one moment, she'd chosen him.

Words didn't need to be said between them. Her gaze indicated that she understood his gratitude. He quickly reached up and locked onto her lips.

"Thank you," he murmured, delving deeper into her familiar mouth.

They remained passionately caressing that way until Threepio shuffled out and announced his presence loudly with "oh my! Excuse me Master Anakin!"

Padmé pulled away from him breathlessly. He took his time opening his eyes, looking into hers lovingly.

"I'll help you pack," he offered, rocking back on his heels and standing.

"Alright, thank you."

"Threepio," he called back after the protocol droid.

Padmé led the way inside and he left her to her wardrobe for a moment as he went after the golden droid.

"Could you com R2 and get him to come here please? And maybe you could make us some breakfast too?"

He suppressed a smile as Threepio regained his bouncy personality. It was like being given a task gave him purpose, and it wouldn't do to laugh. However much he wanted to.

"Of course Master Anakin!"

Nodding, Anakin left him to it and went to join Padmé.

He couldn't believe she'd caved. At the same time though, he was glad she had. There was almost a pressure, bearing down on his brain. What he'd told her was true, it was growing, and it wasn't pleasant. The more loudly it warned him to get out, the more pronounced the reminder that his slaying of Dooku was outright cold-blooded murder.

It was something he didn't want to remember. But he knew he wasn't right inside. And until he was, this threat that became more tangible by the instant could harm Padmé. Or their baby. He wouldn't risk her, she was everything to him. Pregnant as she was he immediately decided she wasn't as fully capable of taking care of herself, hadn't he watched last night how some of her agility was gone?

He needed to take her away from this threat, and he needed to remove himself from it. Only away from the weight on his mind could he focus on his insides and try to understand himself. Analyse what was going on within him.

The sooner, the better.

Padmé stretching for a suitcase just out of her reach was the sight that greeted him in her dressing room.

"Here," he offered, easily grasping the handle and lifting it down.

"What can I do?" he wanted to know, looking around her clothes with a little confusion.

He'd never been entirely sure how all these things went into her outfits. Some she obviously needed daily, otherwise were worn once and never thought of again. He couldn't really distinguish what fell into which category. With a quickly hidden grin he acknowledged that all he was good at was getting her *out* of these clothes.

Luckily she gave him a more appropriate task.

"Sit on the bed and truly think this out," she instructed.

Without a word of complaint he did as he was told. Well, the sitting part at least.

"You're going to pack, we're going to get in your ship, and fly to Naboo, then we're going to get a transport up to the lake country and we're going to hide away until the baby's born."

His acute Jedi senses told him she paused just briefly upon hearing that last part.

"The baby won't be born for a few months," she subtly led him.

He could see right through her though. One of the advantages of being so totally enamoured, and totally deprived. All their encounters, right down to the small idiosyncrasies of hers, played out in his head over and over when he was alone. He'd think about every small movement she made, the turn of her speech, the possible meanings to her words. And every time he came home to her he was able to read her a little bit better.

Right now she thought he didn't know what he really wanted. Which was where she was wrong. The baby wasn't immediately due, that didn't change things.

"I know."

She simply nodded and folded a cloak into her case beside him.

"Are you going to tell anyone that we're going? Obi-Wan?" Padmé pushed him

Obi-Wan? No, definitely not. If Obi-Wan knew what he was planning to do he definitely wouldn't approve. Even more so if he found out Padmé was accompanying him. He would make him stay here. On Coruscant. And there was no way he was staying here any longer than absolutely necessary. No more than an hour or two from now they'd be blasting into space if he had anything to say about it.

"No," he challenged her.

She gave him a brief glance and continued back into her cupboard. Usually she had an opinion whenever his relationship with Obi-Wan was strained. Always wanting him to respect the Jedi master's position, and consult him for help. This time he was waiting for an objection that never came. It pleased him to think that Padmé was beginning to trust his judgement a bit more. For her to believe in him meant more than any wise Jedi master's praise possibly could.

"They'll discover you're missing quickly," she pointed out, but didn't dismiss him.

He liked that.

"Last night I told Obi-Wan I'd be meditating for a week. We have at least that much time before they even get suspicious."

Her eyes danced over him with undisguised mirth.

"I don't believe you can sit still for a week," she seemed a little too incredulous for his liking with that.

"I could!" he replied indignantly, defending his honour.

"But you haven't," she made sure, teasing him lightly.

"No," he surrendered, grinning at her as they shared the quiet joke.

Both of them knew him too well to believe he could meditate beyond a few hours if pushed. For some reason Obi-Wan had been much more gullible there. Perhaps his friend liked to believe it of him, almost as a desperate wish.

She stopped by his side and locked closed one travel case, to his surprise.

"That was quick."

A simple smile was all he got in return. It was all he needed. To see her glowing with no resentment at being forced from her life's passion, only peace and a subdued happiness. His hopes were lifted greatly to think they could be out of here within the hour if she kept going at this rate. Then they would be all alone. Together. Well, the baby too.

He shot a quick glance towards the dress she was wearing. It hid the curve of her middle with its large folds. That was obviously on purpose — she'd dressed with the intent of going into her office where hiding her pregnancy seemed to be her prime objective. His face scowled at the concealing fabric though. She shouldn't have to hide something she was so happy about.

Anakin lit up at the thought that soon she wouldn't have to hide it, because the only one to be around to see it would be him.

Silence permeated the air between them as she moved back and forth. But it was comfortable, and warm, and useless words weren't necessary to fill it. Anakin was quite content to sit without speaking and indulge himself in the rarity of Padmé.

It didn't take long for her to finish packing all together.

"I need to send a few messages before we leave," she told him, heading for the large office next door.

Not more delays. Last time she'd told him she had to leave 'a few messages' he'd waited four hours for her! This time she took pity on him though. Either that or his face betrayed how stricken he truly felt.

"Relax Anakin. I won't be more than ten minutes," she soothed, rubbing her hand at his cheek.

He nuzzled into it automatically, turning and giving it a quick kiss. With anyone else he would have chastised himself for being so easily placated, but with Padmé he couldn't help himself.

She was far too loving with him.

"Hurry," he urged.

“I will.”

R2 trundled in the front door at that moment and Anakin decided he may as well let both the droids know what their plans were. After all, they were coming too — the two friends that shared but would never tell of their precious relationship. His gaze couldn’t help but eventually drift back to her ajar office door. He could feel her in there, moving quickly so as not to keep him waiting.

She didn’t wish to put him through any more pain than he had to. The feeling swelled his heart even more and he silently thanked her in his mind.

“Padmé is pregnant with our child and we’re leaving for Naboo,” he told the droids with a calmness he didn’t quite feel.

The urge to be leaving pressed at him. It was rubbing him the wrong way, and the sooner they were into space, the better.

“Oh Congratulations sir!” Threepio answered excitedly.

Anakin was a little taken aback by his exclamation. Yes, congratulations were in order, he hadn’t thought of it like that. Had they been any other pairing, at any other time, they would probably be telling their acquaintances of their good news. People like Padmé’s family, their friends, Obi-Wan.

He shook his head away from that thought. *Stop thinking about Obi-Wan. You’re leaving him behind, and although it hurts, it has to be done. He’s a fantastic Jedi, he will be able to take care of himself.*

It still didn’t feel right though.

R2 beeped an enthusiastic echo while Threepio started pestering him with questions he didn’t know the answer to.

“When is it due?”

Anakin shrugged. That question was asked like he was already well aware of the answer. Which he wasn’t. He reminded himself to read up on babies at some point today. *After* they were in space.

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

Wow. That little bump was actually a person already. A boy or a girl? He had no idea about that either. Maybe Padmé knew somehow. He’d ask. Perhaps. After he’d done his reading, he didn’t want to seem as naïve as he had last night.

“I don’t know Threepio,” he answered truthfully. “Ask Padmé later. Right now I need you to help me, carry this bag please.”

He handed over one of her cases and grabbed another for himself. She was coming, he could feel it.

They were going to be out of here. Finally — finally!

He hummed with excitement as Padmé came out into the main room.

"I'm ready," she informed immediately.

"Let's go then," he encouraged.

They could leave. It was all going to be alright. They were going to get away from the darkness that lingered here and disappear up into the wilds of Naboo.

With a hint of mirth he watched her try to juggle her datapad and two bags, eventually dropping the small reader to the floor. Before she could even bend down he remembered her trying to remove her shoes last night.

Quickly he bent down onto his knees to retrieve it. His heart murmured a soft appreciation as he came eyelevel with her stomach. Grasping her datapad he curved his hand around the back of her thigh, leaning into the swelling.

"Anakin!" she laughed in surprise.

Anakin let his eyes fall closed just for a moment in perfect contentedness. The darkness slipped around him but no longer consumed his consciousness as he rested against her. She filled him with warmth and light. And the hard protrusion reminded him that it wasn't an illusion, she really was pregnant under there.

He stood up before he could let himself get too carried away. They would have plenty of time for that later, right now they should be going.

Without a word he handed over her reader and then bent down once more to quickly retrieve his cloak from the floor.

She grinned secretively at him. Probably remembering, as he was, why it was lying so haphazardly on the floor.

"Later, when we're on the ship," she promised him with a quiet huskiness.

Their eyes met as she too slipped into her cloak and energy sparked between them. Oh yes, later. When they were in hyperspace and had nothing else to fill their time, both cloaks would be discarded. Quickly.

Her hungriness washed over him and he admired her forbearance.

Without another word, but many promising glances that were becoming more furtive as time passed they stepped out to the turbolift.

All that playful flirting was washed away as the anxiousness of being seen flooded Anakin's being.

No one would interrupt their journey. Not if he had anything to say about it.

Padmé pulled her hood even further over her face. They couldn't afford for anyone to recognise them. And they certainly couldn't afford for anyone to follow them.

The scandal it would create would have reporters throwing all their efforts into finding them. And then the cherished secret of their relationship would be out. She could just imagine

how the time leading up to their baby's arrival could be ruined by such an incident. People and droids hounding them, snooping, prying into their lives.

Not to imagine what would happen to Anakin. If the Jedi council found out he was the father his life would be ruined. She had no intention of letting that happen. Not if she could help it.

Purposely she kept a low profile, R2 and Threepio moving silently behind them.

Captain Typho didn't emerge to question her as they reached the lower level. Without trying to show it, she nervously walked through the foyer, hoping she attracted no one's attention. If they hadn't found her now, it was only a few more steps to freedom.

When they made it out onto the street she was in disbelief. Usually the Naboo Volunteer guards watched the comings and goings from her apartment like they expected an assassination attempt any moment. A quick glance towards an intensely concentrating Anakin told her how they'd managed to leave so easily.

He was doing something. She didn't know if he was just hiding their moving figures, or interfering with the guards' minds, but she didn't need to.

They stood for a moment outside the door, boarding the first transport and riding in silence up to the skyhooks.

Chancellor Palpatine did not have one doubt Anakin had every reason to be fearful now. Certain death was all the young Jedi's so obviously beloved wife had to look forward to on Coruscant. His so-called masters were fools not to see how attached the boy was to her.

Luckily for him, they were too proud to reveal their blindness, and would never see what was coming.

The Sith Lord watched on as his personal assistant shuffled from the room. The steaming hot cup she'd brought in rested patiently on the large desk, just waiting.

The water evaporating off the top then disappeared into the air bringing a cold smile to his lips. Just the like that entire order would soon evaporate into nothingness.

Anakin must have felt the danger by now, he was too much a product of the force to be ignorant of it. He was also the only one that would perceive the Sith Lord's building threat.

It was his one major flaw would bring him straight to the Chancellor's hands. His interpretation would almost certainly manifest as some kind of threat to his lover.

It was time to offer the boy his assistance.

He considered for a moment the situation that would be best to start reeling Anakin in. It would have to be slow, subtle. And seem non-threatening. He glanced down quickly to his schedule. Ahhhh. The ballet. Perfect.

Without a second thought he activated his com and waited for it to connect to the boy.

It was all she could do not to jump in surprise when, from where he was seated silently by her side, his hand slid briefly across hers. The touch of his fingertips softly grazing her skin enlivened her entire body. He had retreated back into his sleeve all too quickly but the feeling had been there. The reassurance that nobody would discover them, that they were free. That he was all hers.

Which she had not for one minute doubted.

With quiet pride she remained seated by his side, accepting his hand as she stood. They were quick to pull apart, lest anyone should read more into it. Soon they wouldn't have to do that anymore. Soon she'd be able to take his hand whenever she wanted and hold on.

As they stepped out the open doors onto the landing platform her mind was filled with imaginings of what that must be like. They'd never had such a relationship, where hands could be held beyond brief seconds, touches and thoughts shared whenever they wanted. They were probably too used to hiding now to give such physical signs of their affection.

Still, it would be a nice change.

All of a sudden she heard a beeping. Her com. Looking down with a frown she reached for the small device.

They both pulled to a stop, just beyond the edge of the massive floating platform. He watched her intently, obviously waiting to see if she'd answer it.

Then his started too. Their eyes met. *Don't* her heart suddenly begged her silently. If she didn't make the connection then perhaps they could still get away. Perhaps they'd be able to have their peaceful retreat to the lake country, uninterrupted. They'd still be able to start their family. All she had to do was leave it to beep itself out.

Padmé had forgotten all about his little demanding device.

She held his gaze as he deftly pulled the com from a pocket on his utility belt. There was the slightest of hesitations, then he grinned triumphantly.

The sound coming from his gloved mechanical hand was unmistakeable, but she looked down to confirm it anyway. The beeping stopped as he crushed the com in his fist. As if he needed to confirm to her how serious he was. He was giving all this up, and he was doing it for her.

With a step backwards he held his hand over the edge of the structure. His fist opened and all the little shards fell into the abyss below. His link to everyone else literally shattered and gone.

Not quite able to let go that much she touched a button on her own to remove its power source. It silenced in her hand. Matching secret smiles of shared anticipation graced their faces as they turned back to their craft, hurrying.

Without a pause in either stride they took sure steps across the open platform and, once she'd lowered the ramp, up into their ship.

"Start the takeoff cycle R2," she requested, detouring to their bedroom.

Quickly she stowed her cases in the bottom of her wardrobe so they wouldn't bounce around during the early stages of their flight.

Anakin rapidly appeared beside her, handing over her last case.

"Don't you have anything?" she asked with genuine surprise as she saw him standing there, with nothing.

He gave her a bright smile.

"My lightsaber is all I need," he quipped. Then, on an afterthought "and you."

Without even thinking about it she caught his head and pulled him down for the sweetest kiss. He had ambitions, big ones. He spoke of becoming a Jedi master so often that she couldn't quite believe he was willing to risk it all by leaving. When he said things like that it melted her heart.

She counted herself lucky for everything she had, but most of all for him. Her life would be nothing without him. The delightful comments he made from time to time would have been too saccharine coming from anyone else, with him it was usually how he truly felt. And that made them all the sweeter.

"Let's get out of here."

His hands drifted over her hips all the way to the cockpit. But once they were inside he left her be so she could concentrate on taking off, sitting with a huge smile on his face as they left the atmosphere.

She was aware of it but didn't pay him much attention. The nav computer was complaining about too many ships on her scope, and they had to move further out of the system before the jump vector was clear. Once it was though, she fastened her hand over the leavers and pulled back smoothly.

Anakin's lips were nibbling on her neck before she had even completed the manoeuvre safely.

"I can't believe we just did that," she frowned, sitting back in her chair as what was happening truly hit her.

They were running away. Like naughty young lovers without a care in the universe. Except they had far too many cares and they'd done it anyway. Although she trusted Anakin with her life, she had to wonder if the news of the baby had somehow influenced this feeling of his. Coruscant was no a pleasant place to be, it never was. There was always threat lurking in one way or another.

Perhaps they should have waited a few days. Given Anakin time to settle down and let his thoughts clear.

Before Padmé could get too deep into her musings Anakin swivelled her chair around and, taking her hands, clasped them tightly.

"Relax," he coaxed with a bright spark twinkling naughtily in his eye.

His enthusiasm, the love he radiated, was too powerful to be ignored. The hope, the love, the total lack of regard for anything besides her poured out of him and she had no options but to accept it.

“Make me,” she challenged him.

“In the bedroom or right here?” he breathed right back, his hands drifting over her hips.

Drawing in sharp breath at his want she cupped his cheeks and kissed him firmly.

The lines of hyperspace blurred unnoticed around them as they lost themselves in each other.

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

Anakin raised an eyebrow as he watched Padmé type at the dashboard. The identification codes she was sending to Naboo ground control seemed different.

“Those weren’t your senatorial clearances,” he noted.

“Standard holiday traffic,” she murmured back distractedly.

He nodded and didn’t disturb her further. She was being more careful than he’d thought to be. If they were going to hide from the Jedi, they needed to be wary. Not using landing clearances that gave her top priority as the planet’s Senator would be a good start.

“No one knows we’re missing together,” he reminded.

It was like he was giving her an excuse not to hide.

Her head looked up, turned and stared at him silently. If Obi-Wan came after him, Padmé would be the first place to check. They both knew it.

“They will suspect once they discover we disappeared at the same time,” she told him coolly.

She looked down briefly again and grabbed the controls to manually land the craft in their designated hanger.

“We’ll get some supplies and head straight out of the city,” she decided.

“Alright. Keeping a low profile might be a good idea.”

Nodding she flawlessly touched them down then stood somewhat awkwardly.

He gathered their cases as she tugged her cloak on and purposely jerked the hood up.

Just before they stepped from the hanger he reached out to lay a hand on her arm.

“What is it?” she asked in surprise.

“I’m sorry that you have to do this,” he honestly regretted.

“Do what? Have you all to myself? Get ready for our baby?”

“Hide. Because of me.”

She smiled and squeezed his hand tightly. He felt more reassurance in the warmth of her fingers clasping over his than he had from any Jedi master. All their words of wisdom had now been left behind, abandoned, and at this moment he felt he’d made the right choice.

Perhaps she didn’t though. After all, she had much more to lose. Her job, her reputation, her life’s passion, her family’s approval. Of course she dismissed all his worries with a simple

“I don’t mind,”

and a big smile. As she disembarked he paused for a moment to grin after her, then picked up their luggage and waved for the droids to follow them.

Whereas two days ago this plan had seemed impossible to pull off, he now could not wait to leave civilisation.

Anakin bounded out of the small boat, eagerly offering Padmé his hand. He knew full well she didn’t need his help, but it was like a symbol. Her soft hand slid over his, their fingers clasp tightly together. And they didn’t let go, sharing the first step into a different phase of their life. *Theirs*. He wasn’t quite sure what it held for them, but he knew that this was the first time in so long that he had felt truly happy.

Her hand remained in his as she laid her second foot on steady land. He savoured the feeling of her warm skin, her fingers curling around his own. On his hip his lightsaber brushed against his thigh as he moved, as if to remind him that he had other duties too. But he purposely ignored the inanimate weapon.

His eyes drifted over Padmé. They’d made it. Whatever was going to happen on Coruscant, Padmé wouldn’t be there. She’d be here, unhappy at hiding, but at the same time — he gasped briefly as he felt it again. Her joy. Her eager anticipation assaulted him as she too realised that their life as no more than Anakin and Padmé started here. Maybe they’d go back, but then again maybe they wouldn’t. The point was, they were together.

His eyes caressed her as she greeted the awaiting house-staff and announced they were could all take paid leave. In silence he stood by her side, just a step behind. He was at once the bodyguard he had been so long ago, and the lover who was now allowed to claim her hand in his own.

The awe that always existed as she issued commands flooded him, and he remained quiet as she finished dismissing the staff. Then her eyes turned on him. Lighting up, he somehow just knew. She’d sent them all away from here, because from now it was just them. He wouldn’t have to give his attention to anyone else, and she would be all his.

With that thought in mind they left the ferryman to it as Anakin nearly dragged Padmé up the small set of steps and across the terrace.

His eyes fell across the aged stones. Inside his chest his heart sped up to see the solid balustrade, the calm waters beyond.

They were here again. Where his life had been on the verge of falling apart, only to suddenly be made perfect. The one time he had been allowed to truly express his devotion to Padmé and give her everything he had — himself.

As if she somehow understood his sudden quietness, it was right now that she tugged him back to the same exact spot. They faced each other like they had on that afternoon.

“Padmé,” he grinned, the secret shared between just them two.

“Anakin,” she answered back.

Her face held a quiet radiance he had been seeing more and more since he'd rejoined her on Coruscant. Was that only a few days ago?

"Have you been here since?" he quietly enquired.

Very intimately, he raised his hand and brushed his thumb over her cheek. That day he became hers was paling in his memory, compared to now. Compared to being here as her husband of almost four years. Now he knew without a doubt how well and truly he could make her happy.

Wondrously his gaze drifted over her eyes, the lake behind them forgotten. He'd never been free to study his surrounds here. Before he had been dealing with her initial rejection, his fears for his mother, the threat of leaving her when he wanted her so much. Now nothing weighed on his conscience. On the contrary, he felt like he was doing everything right.

But he still, couldn't concentrate on the nature that surrounded him. He would probably never get the chance. Because he had Padmé right in front of him, and he couldn't help that his attention unerringly remained locked on her. In that moment he sent out a brief wave of gratitude to the force. For tying his life so inexplicably to hers.

It suddenly seemed important that she was here only with him. This was their special place, where their love had been allowed to grow freely. She had taken his innocent heart and cradled it with all the tenderness it needed, even if she had tried to deny she was doing it.

He hated to think that this place had felt her touch without him around to bask in it.

"Not since we were married," she inadvertently assured his oddly fragile spirit.

He ducked his head briefly in embarrassment. Just him. She had only been here with him.

With a quiet confidence she faced him fully, taking his hands into her own. Though the sun wasn't setting and no holy man presided, her tender kiss held all the promise of their first as they married.

The last lingering pressure on his mind that Coruscant had so intrinsically thrummed fell away beneath her lips. The lingering doubt he had about what was the source of that warning remained, but for the moment he pushed it away. Not as he had pushed other warnings away — not suppressing it. Rather, putting it aside knowing he would analyse it deeply and carefully, at the appropriate time. That wasn't now.

Now was about the sweetness of Padmé's spirit consuming his awareness. Slowly, she pulled back from his lips and stared deep into his eyes. She sought so honestly to reassure him of her love. That just because they were no longer a series of desperate, brief encounters didn't mean she didn't still love him with all of her being.

As she stroked his hair away from his eyes he sighed gratefully. Every stress, every horror of war fell away.

"I can't believe we're doing this," she grinned up at him.

For a brief moment he thought her regrets were resurfacing. Had he not been trying to divorce himself from the force he would have felt her gentle happiness. Instead it took her tender hands soothing his battle-scarred soul to reassure him of her love.

“This is the first time I can remember when I was not serving the greater good, or at least someone else. It feels wrong to do something so selfish,” she confessed to him and only him.

Anakin wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into his chest. She laid her head against him and he allowed the next blink of his eyes to linger in darkness just a little longer than normal. Her brief hesitance revealed to him how much it unnerved her to be thinking of her own needs before everyone else’s.

“If it helps Padmé you can think of it as serving your family’s needs,” Anakin’s voice finally found itself.

She looked up to his eyes for a moment, then laughed.

Not quite understanding he loosened his hold then shifted his gaze down to her. Her laughter only increased as she physically pulled away from him, slapping her hand over her mouth.

“What is it?” he asked, trying to share her mirth while having no understanding at all.

“I suddenly had the thought that my family had found out about us!” she spluttered.

She continued to laugh as she crushed herself back to him. All she’d done was succeeded in making him more confused.

“You meant you!” she was giggling.

Her laughter suddenly ceased.

“And our child,” she finished softly.

The swell of the baby pressed into him as she hugged him, and he was acutely aware of it.

“Ani, this is where our family will start,” she wondered, in a much more hushed tone.

He tried to look out towards the beautiful mountains but his eyes didn’t stray beyond the perfectly created hair ornaments underneath his chin. His hands came up to caress the softness of her bright gown, tracing the intricate patterns that danced over her back.

“I’m glad,” he whispered softly.

For just a brief moment, he thought of the family he already had. Padmé, who carried his offspring too. His mother, gone from his life but not his heart. And Obi-Wan.

Roughly he clamped down his mind and forced himself to focus on the green hills. Now he could see them perfectly, covered in trees, rocks. Anything to stop himself from thinking that by choosing to come here with Padmé, by choosing to start a family at all, he was ignoring every lesson the wise Jedi master had spent years patiently teaching him.

Betraying every trust that was placed in him by lying about his mental state, and running away.

NO! Anakin’s heart protested, taking control of him. Obi-Wan had had the last fourteen years of his life. It was Padmé’s turn.

With that in mind he stared at the sharply rising hillsides that surrounded him and kept her close to his chest.

Obi-Wan finished looking at the intelligence coming out of Saleucami, readying himself for the report on Outer Rim sieges he was about to deliver. Master Vos would move his troops if events continued on the same path they had taken.

He closed the file and stood up, stretching his cramped muscles. It was time to arouse Anakin. Surprisingly, he was still meditating. Eight days later. Begrudgingly Obi-Wan acknowledged that the freedom of knighthood had done his ex-apprentice much good. As a boy he would have to be forced to do bare minutes of meditation, in excess of a week would be unfathomable.

Leaving his suite Obi-Wan strode towards Anakin's room, still finding it difficult to understand why such a length of time was necessary. Anakin didn't seem particularly unbalanced, or in need of self-exploration to maintain his focus. On the contrary, lately he'd seemed so alive, so invigorated.

He possessed a personality that was frowned upon for a Jedi but handy in a war — a love of action, adventure, confrontation.

Obi-Wan laughed softly to himself, caught up in his own thoughts of the cocky man his arrogant teenage apprentice had become. He came up on the closed door and pressed the announcer.

There was no immediate answer, but Anakin's time for rest had come to an end, he needed to attend the intelligence session. Obi-Wan pressed the button again and felt inside the room for his friend's presence, intent on giving him a small hint through the force if he was deeply immersed in the living currents of energy.

That's strange.

Pulling up, he briefly doubted himself then felt inside the room again. No, it still felt empty. No, Anakin must be in there. He would have come to find him if he were available again.

Obi-Wan did a third, thorough scan. Then he slapped the entry panel and peered inside once the door had slid up. No one was in here.

"Anakin?" he called.

It was possible he was trying some new hiding technique.

"There's a briefing in half an hour, it would be in your interest to attend," he told the empty set of rooms, looking into the bedroom but finding that it too was empty.

"Curious," he muttered to himself.

There was nothing further to be gained from scouting out Anakin's rooms. Obi-Wan felt a small sense of betrayal at having been neglected to be informed of Anakin's emergence. It was the least his friend could do, after he'd warned off people away from the rooms for the past week.

He'd been trying to help his friend rest. Just how long had Anakin been out?

In a slow, thoughtful walk the Jedi master left the empty room and made for the docking bay. Perhaps Anakin had cleared his head and now needed the solace that came with tinkering on his starfighter. It certainly wouldn't be the first time.

As he passed through the grand temple's lively corridors he retrieved his communicator and tried to connect to Anakin. For the first time in his life, it didn't go through.

"Odd," he thoughtfully tried again.

Still nothing. It was almost an unconscious reaction to start listing the reasons Anakin's com would not connect. The only ones he could come up with was that it was either off, or broken. Both of which were unacceptable.

He reached the docking bay quite quickly. Looking around he laid eyes on Anakin's newly issued fighter. The plane had obviously not yet been touched, not surprising as he'd only just lost his last one.

Then again... Obi-Wan peered around the hanger more closely, looking for a familiar blue-domed droid. No R2 unit present? Even though it was a new fighter that Anakin would insist had to be modified before he climbed in? Surely the knight's little friend would be working overtime on the new starship?

Nope. The droid was nowhere.

Shrugging the loss of his friend off, for now, Obi-Wan gave up his search. He had an information session to run, he would find Anakin later.

Anakin's fingers hovered above the shallow water. He couldn't remember ever being so comfortable as he was right now. He plunged his arm into the cool depths and brushed his fingertips over the waterlogged sand that comprised the bottom of the lake.

"Padmé," he called out to the legs and round belly up on the beach of sand.

"Anakin," she called back to the broad shoulders that hung half-off the floater and dangling into the calm waters of the lake.

He turned his head to watch her and found her propping herself up on her elbows. Their eyes locked with intensity.

"I think this is the first time I've ever wasted a day doing nothing," he decided, a slow half-smile doing its best to hide on his face.

She heard him and tried to think of her own last holiday. She was drawing a blank. Probably not since her term as queen had finished and she'd taken that month with her parents. Certainly never with Anakin.

"It's very relaxing," she smirked.

He looked like he was about to say something and she waited intently. But he seemed to catch himself and when no words were forthcoming she cocked her head questioningly.

He was always hiding things. When it was about secretive missions or unpleasant battles she'd come to accept he wouldn't tell. But now, now he had no need to hide from her. They were finally alone, just the two of them with no pressure for it to ever end. No sense of secrecy, no sense of selfish indulgence.

It was a scene she'd never bothered to envision, who was to know there would be such a time for them. He didn't have any need to hide where he was from the council, or have a finite limit on his time. And she had left Jar Jar in charge of the senate.

She shook herself and tried not to be angry, focusing on Anakin's broad form lolling over the water. Try as she might though, both those things bothered her. The Gungan had a good heart but was terribly gullible and in truth had no place as a galactic senator.

Anakin was hiding from the council. But long term, not short term. Her eyes continued to narrow at that thought. She wasn't sure she entirely agreed with this plan of his. To simply disappear from their radar and never be heard from again.

She loved him far too much to keep him here. Anakin Skywalker would surely bore easily once he ran out of exciting things to do. Which would be soon enough.

But for now he was content and she was happy to be with him like this. Like a normal couple, with normal problems. No fate of the galaxy weighing on their shoulders. Just a nursery to paint and each other's company to enjoy.

Distractedly her hand reached down to run over her naked belly. Moving her fingers around the top left she was sure she could feel the outline of an arm. Then again yesterday she'd been sure she felt the same thing on the bottom right, so she was just content to know it was safe in there for now.

"What did you tell the others when you left?" he asked thoughtfully.

Was that the question he was about to ask her before? She frowned and stilled her hand. She hadn't really told them anything. She'd left a text message for Jar Jar to take over and told Threepio to pick up one of the bags. There had been no official leave taking at all. Anakin had been so anxious to get away and she was so caught up in her own enthusiasm that protocol had somehow been left by the wayside.

"I didn't say anything to anyone."

His head rose from the floating lounge in surprise.

"They're going to think you've been kidnapped or something," he quirked.

He seemed mildly stunned that she too was capable of irrational behaviour.

Padmé sat up bewildered. Her eyes flew towards the house in horror. They were going to think that! Her message was short and to the point, there had been no explanation or an expected return date. She wasn't really expecting to return at all.

"I —"

She cut herself off almost immediately and looked down at her hand in surprise.

“What’s wrong?” his concerned voice echoed around the enclosed mountains as he called a little too loudly.

He was also a little too worried, because he forgot he was sitting on water and promptly fell into the lake.

Padmé glanced up to catch Anakin’s antics. When he emerged a few seconds later, already dashing up the shore with water streaming off of him, she let her face burst out in a huge smile.

“He kicked me,” she told him in astonishment.

He looked down at her hand with a “what!”

“Right here,” she grabbed his hand and pressed it under her own in wonder.

All thoughts of worried loved ones were forgotten. Their baby moved again to the bewilderment of the young couple. After a silent second, no more, Anakin suddenly yelped

“He! Why do you think it’s a boy?”

Padmé just grinned at him, showing that she really had no idea whether it was a boy.

Deciding to tease him anyway she pronounced “my motherly intuition.”

She could tell he liked being issued that challenge. He looked like the roguish Jedi the galaxy loved as he defied

“With a kick that strong it’s got to be a girl.”

His eyes playfully dared her to contradict him back again. Before she could the little thing kicked for a third time. Anakin’s face suddenly turned serious, and she watched that nervous habit he had manifest itself. His teeth started worrying the bottom corner of his lip.

“What is it?” she asked kindly.

She lifted her hand from her stomach and reached out to steady herself against the sand once more.

Anakin left his hand pressed firmly up against the baby. Wanting more. In answer to her question he just continued to torture his poor lip.

“I’d like a girl,” he finally told her wistfully.

By the time they’d gotten over marvelling at the feeling the baby had settled down to quiet once more. That left them lying in the sun, side-by-side and dozing lightly on the warm towel as the cool breeze whipped around them.

Two days. I haven’t been able to find him in two days. What is he up to?

“Master Windu,” Obi-Wan greeted politely.

He was the second to arrive in the council chambers for their meeting. No use beating around the bush, he should mention Anakin’s absence now. If he were lucky, perhaps Mace

had seen him. And if he hadn't, then Anakin had to be found. His presence was required — he was one of their most successful leaders.

"Have you seen Anakin recently?"

"Not since your return," Mace replied, taking up his own seat. "He was meditating."

"Yes, that was what I thought too."

"Skywalker is missing?"

Obi-Wan studied his friend's blank face carefully. Missing. Suddenly it occurred to him that it was possible Anakin hadn't just been missing for two days. In reality, no one had seen him in ten. No one had attempted to contact him in that time. It was just possible that he'd come out of his meditation a lot earlier than they thought.

"I tried to contact him two nights ago," Obi-Wan revealed as Ki-Adi Mundi's hologrammatic form shimmered in.

"It's possible he's been out of contact for longer."

"Do you still believe him to be on Coruscant?"

Trying not to show that he was startled by that thought, he pondered. There was no reason for Anakin to disappear, especially when he could be basking in the triumph of his big rescue. Arrogance was not encouraged, but Anakin had always possessed a good deal of bravado.

It wasn't characteristic to shun such an opportunity.

"I see no reason for him to leave."

Mace nodded thoughtfully, leaning forward.

"His com won't connect," Obi-Wan pushed the case for serious consideration.

Ten days was an awfully long time not to be seen.

"Have security recordings checked while we are in session. If he cannot be found we will discuss this matter further," Mace decided.

A quick request was sent down to the security centre but then the matter was put aside. Only at the end of their meeting did they revisit when the news came that Anakin had come back briefly, then left and not returned exactly ten days ago.

A ripple of surprise passed around the chamber. That was an awfully long period of time for a knight to go missing. Especially one who was expecting to be reassigned soon.

"We cannot afford for him to be out of service," Obi-Wan's thoughts flashed back to their last meal together.

And Anakin leaving for a walk just after. Yes, Anakin had been going out then, why had he not remembered that before?

If Grievous was found soon he'd prefer to have Anakin there at the confrontation. After all, they were the two who had already encountered the General, they would be the best pair to go against him a second time.

He turned to Master Yoda for some guidance, to find that his eyes were already scrunched shut.

“Sense him, I cannot,” Yoda concluded, which brought more than a little shock around the room.

Not good.

“Obi-Wan, you know him best. Seek him out and bring him back to the temple, even if you have to go off-planet. The search for Grievous is closing in and we will need him,” Windu directed and Obi-Wan nodded.

His mind was turning over rapidly though. If Yoda couldn’t sense him, then what in the blazes was he doing?

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

‘We’ll take a picnic’ he’d said.

How was it he had gotten out of all the preparations then?

Padmé tossed a datapad into the large basket. The lid had to be coaxed into snapping shut.

“I’m ready,” she called loudly.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Anakin’s voice called back.

Her mind danced ahead of her, wondering what he was doing in the workroom he’d found around the back. After walking in on him yesterday and being sprayed with grease she wasn’t particularly game to seek him out again. But she was glad he’d found something to entertain himself. There was that feeling again. That soon the great hero would be bored.

Relying on him being more than a minute she left their picnic basket near the door and went to look over the baby’s room. Right now it still looked like the office it had always been. Large, dark-wood desk. Holo receiver. Bookshelves. Tomorrow, she promised herself. Tomorrow they would begin cleaning out this room. Because her baby was going to sleep in a cradle right underneath that window where a coat-stand now covered the gorgeous view.

“Ready?” a calm voice asked in her ear.

She nodded as she felt him standing behind her. He peered around her shoulder and looked over the grand study thoughtfully.

“Is this the baby’s room?”

“I’d like it to be,” she replied.

Padmé turned slightly into him, her hands resting comfortably on his chest as she surveyed the grand view out the clear window. Almost as an automatic response he slipped his arms over her shoulders.

He held her for a moment and surveyed the space. But his mind was obviously on the here and now, not the future. The baby’s arrival was far off and would wait. Right now they had each other, and should savour every moment of it.

“Let’s go,” he breathed into her ear.

He kissed the lobe briefly then captured her hand and led her away. His insistence on holding her hand was bringing a begrudging acceptance from her. She didn’t like to feel so physically trapped all the time. Especially since she wasn’t used to it. Yet at the same time there was a part of her that basked in the emphasis he placed on such an innocent act. He used the connection to convey his reactions as she talked to him, squeezing and stroking her fingers every now and then, filling up her awareness with him.

The basket swung up over his other arm and together they made a peaceful trek up to the shaak grazing fields.

At her side Anakin surveyed the unchanged waterfalls, gushing more liquid than a Tatooine resident could hope to see in a lifetime.

“You fell in love with me here” came tumbling out of his lips.

Padmé hadn’t been here since that time before they were married either. Somehow the purity of the memory was not spoiled by the reality in front of her. It made her feel younger, carefree. Something Anakin seemed to encourage as they discarded all contact with the friends they’d left behind and took the time to explore one another. It was fulfilling, liberating.

She leant down and picked at a select few of the meadow flowers, weaving them into her hair as they stood looking over the paddocks.

“I fell for you long before we came here,” she acknowledged then halted herself and looked away when his intent gaze rounded on her.

He looked so cute, his face scrunched up like it was a total surprise. Her tall handsome partner looking so disagreeable because she may have loved him for a few more days than he was aware of.

“You could have told me!” Anakin was indignant.

She shook her head and started walking higher up into the grasses, pausing atop a low rise. He scurried after her, watching with interest as she pulled a blanket from inside the basket and laid it out.

“I was heartbroken that you kept rejecting me,” he tried to guilt her into looking at him.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t hide the little smirk that weaselled its way onto his face. Somehow, having her as his adoring bride now, had stripped all the pain associated with those memories. Instead of feeling the aching grief from having her refuse him, he could only laugh lightly at being previously denied. It was hard to be bitter when the same person sat beside him, someone he was so utterly in love with, who was so accepting of his attentions.

There was no jealousy of possible other lovers — the ones he had been so sure would win her affections. Now she carefully lowered herself to the rug, showing that she was carrying his child and smiling at him in earnest.

“I was terrified by your political leanings,” she remembered then eyed him curiously. “I think I still am.”

He leaned into the basket and pulled out lunch.

“I thought we agreed to disagree? Anyway, no politics. No war,” he insisted as he leaned over and handed her a plate.

Her curly hair fell over her shoulder for a second. He stopped to watch as she brushed it back, then gracefully accepted the crockery he offered. Above them the sky was bright and

clear with the autumnal sunshine, glinting off highlights in her hair. For a brief second he hoped the baby would start to make her look unattractive. Because at the moment he couldn't keep his eyes off of her. Her rounded belly was only making her more beautiful. Not to mention how its mere presence seemed to spark vitality back into her spirit that the war had been slowly draining. If she kept going in this vein he may never look at anything else again.

"Alright. What will we talk about? Because I was reading this morning that Obi-Wan has left his search for Grievous on a 'secret mission'."

She reached into the basket and pulled out the datareader he'd failed to notice.

"Hey! When did you smuggle that in there! No work!"

Good naturedly he dove across the blanket, trying to wrestle it away from. She fought him with a careful tenderness that was aware of the life inside her, but still refused to surrender. They laughed loudly, privately, as she almost gained the upper-hand. It wasn't coincidence that even despite his great advantage in agility Anakin ended up beneath her. Stretched out on his back, pinned to the ground beneath her hips, he looked up seriously.

"Hand it over and I won't have to hurt you," he threatened.

Padmé continued to laugh quietly, covering his hands as they came up to rest on her hips. Even as he was playing the sore loser his hands caressed her. Constantly displaying his love. He couldn't help himself — looking up at her as she straddled his middle only reinforced what he already knew: — he was enamoured. Totally and utterly consumed by her.

"I'm on top here, you can't hurt me," she declared conclusively, refusing to bow to his threats.

With a carefully controlled flip that cradled her body and absorbed the impact without allowing her to escape, their positions had been reversed.

"I won't show mercy," he grinned, pinning her arms by her sides. "Say it Padmé, no work."

"I will make no such compromise!" she hotly contested.

Hoping to be a little more persuasive he lowered himself and, only a breath away from her lips, throatily asserted

"It's mine now," then snatched the datapad from her hand as he gave her a quick kiss.

Hungrily he climbed off her and went back to lunch. Their brief argument already forgotten Padmé sat herself back up, and even though he'd finally won she kept chattering about it anyway. Grinning cheerfully at his disapproving frown she waved him off and continued.

"It seems that there is an issue more pressing for Obi-Wan than ending the war."

She paused then stopped spooning food from containers and looked at him expectantly.

"I think that we are the more pressing issue," she confided.

He already had food in his mouth and was chewing happily until she said that. His pause and swallow must have been more obvious that he thought because she was clearly waiting

for a response.

“What makes you say that?”

She raised an eyebrow and he nodded in reluctant agreement.

“This is why I did not tell anyone where I intended to go. Do you think he can find us?”

Anakin reached for his glass thoughtfully and swallowed the sweet juice. He was annoyed to have to think of anything outside of the loveliness of the world they were in right now. Again with Obi-Wan. There must be a one-sided remnant of the Master-Padawan bond. He was getting suspicious of the uncanny knack his friend had for hunting him, whether Padmé was distracting him with her physical presence or merely the thought of her.

This time though, they were well enough hidden, Anakin was sure of that. Six hyperspace jumps before their final destination would throw anyone off. Moving their ship to a private hanger had been Padmé’s stroke of genius.

In his memory he made sure he correctly remembered clearing the flight records and the controller’s memory as they were passing through. Yes. There was no trail left there. They’d also shielded their recognisable faces in Theed and taken three different public transports to the farther flung Southern region. They couldn’t have been followed. And they’d bought rather than rented a speeder to make it to the lakeshore. If Obi-Wan could track them that far then he deserved the straight answer the ferryman would give him on their whereabouts. Unfortunately for Obi-Wan, even he was not a clairvoyant.

“He’ll certainly come to Naboo to look. We cleared our trail though, he won’t find us,” Anakin concluded.

“I would not go back with him. Coruscant’s dangerous,” he reminded after a moment of silence.

And I’m still not right inside Anakin finished to himself quietly.

She nodded in understanding and sensing his distress subtly altered the subject.

“I don’t like leaving Jar Jar in charge. After the military creation act incident I haven’t trusted him with anything important. He’s going to have to review and make a decision on the war crimes act, which I’m still not sure about. I don’t see justice in having a single figure judge every case. Especially the Chancellor, who is already prone to allowing public opinion to point his moral compass.”

He could feel the frustration rolling off of her. Whether it was the process itself or the fact she wasn’t there to help it along, he wasn’t quite sure.

Grinning, Anakin reminded himself that he was sure that she was physically far away from all the dangers Coruscant posed. That sensation of an ominous fate looming over them disappeared a little more each day they were away from the giant metropolis and right now his senses felt freer, clearer.

What he didn’t know was whether the threat had passed or remained when they left.

With their stomachs full and tired from the trek, Anakin stretched out. After a moment he moved his head to her lap and closed his eyes. Nothing could be more relaxing for him than

this moment.

Padmé slowly stroked her fingers over his forehead, intent on her work, her concentration serving as a focus that allowed him to release himself. His awareness drifted, freed in the life that surrounded him. Padmé next to and above him. The grass. The flowers. The fish in the pools at the bottom of the waterfalls. The small birds riding on the shaak's backs. The shaaks themselves. He let go in a way he had been unable to for almost a year. The peace and quiet that existed here was laid out to bare. It permeated his connection to the force, slowly releasing tension like a spring that had been pulled too far, being eased back rather than snapped. He had an odd sensation that invisible gaps, had been poked through the fabric of his life. He hadn't even noticed them before, but now they were being filled back up.

It was possible these holes the cause of the feeling of internal imbalance. Eagerly Anakin struggled to voice his state to the one person he trusted implicitly.

"It's like I am two different people," he mused quietly into the stillness. "One exists when I'm on a battlefield and I'm carving through battle droids, or up in my fighter dodging missiles. When I feel like that I can't wait for the next challenge — more droidekas or a control ship to drop out of hyperspace — something really exciting."

Padmé looked down at him with alarm.

"Don't you feel remorse for the lives you're taking? Or the comrades you're losing?"

"The comrades yes, but they're usually droids, or leaders who have committed atrocities themselves, then I feel no regret."

He took her hand from his forehead and led it to rest over his heart. Her fingers splayed out, covering the pulsing skin.

"Then I'm with you," he whispered seriously, looking up at her intently.

"And I'm torn. I want to go out and save the entire galaxy for you, but at the same time I just want to laze around in your bed and never see beyond our door again."

She leaned down from behind him, her lips dropping and placing a long kiss to the bridge of his nose.

"We're all of two minds. The more fulfilling option is inevitably the more costly," she told him wisely.

"So is being here with you now wrong? Because I'm fulfilled," he pushed her.

He hadn't meant for this to be a moralistic debate, he just wanted to put into words how he felt. He was so contented that he almost worried for himself. There was no conflict, despite the fact he had abandoned the people who had raised and cared for him. Did that make him an unfeeling monster?

For a moment there was silence.

"You have to know what is important to you. If staying away from this problem on Coruscant is vital, then that is the path you should follow. If you feel that you would be of more use by returning to the Jedi, then return."

She sat waiting for an answer he wasn't to give, her gaze patient and warm. Finally he shook his head in a 'don't worry' and eventually Padmé left him to his musings. He could feel her fingers occasionally tapping her datapad again, her attention turning fully to her work.

It didn't take any meditation to know what was important. Some things were the very foundations of your understanding, and need never be questioned. That Padmé was the only one for whom he would give up his life was one of these. Even if the life he was giving up was to be his life path rather than his actual life force.

He returned his attention to listening to the force. Listening to the soft whispers of its will. To shield his eyes from the sun he lifted his hand to cast a little shade.

Padmé jerked as he sprang from her lap.

"What is it?" she asked, startled as he fell back to his knees.

"My hand," he panicked.

It was obvious by her silence she didn't see the darkness that had leeches onto him. Like a black cloud of smoke, wisps misted across his skin, out of his pores and the joints in his mechanical fingers. He brought his other hand up for comparison and was confronted with the same thing.

"It looks fine," Padmé was obviously puzzled.

He shot his glance up for just a second, then returned his attention to his hands. The sinister cloud became more apparent under the bright light of the Naboo sun. With a slow sense of realisation he understood what it was.

In awe he turned his hands over. The darkside, manifesting itself into something visual. Born of the force, he was able to perceive it unlike any other. And now that his mind was clear of doubt for possibly the first time in his life, the mist slowly burned off, gobbled up by the supple meadow grasses.

Padmé softly caressed his now normal forearm with an "are you alright?"

He nodded and lay himself down by her side, closing his eyes. As she concentrated on frustrating news from Coruscant like the latest movements of troops, Anakin's soul was unknowingly on the mend.

Obi-Wan Kenobi gently settled his fighter to the ground, then surveyed the main military hanger in Theed. This was the most difficult assignment he'd ever had, no competition. The parameters weren't clearly defined, which he detested. The expected outcome was not even hinted at, which was worse. But the very nature of this mission led to the uncertainty. There were too many unknown variables.

To bring Anakin back sounded difficult. To bring him back when you didn't even know why he was missing was going to be almost impossible.

Coming to Naboo seemed instinctive. Senator Amidala's empty apartments had of course been his starting point. He knew Anakin well enough to try the obvious. The Naboo embassy

revealing that Representative Binks would be the ambassador until further notice, that was what really sparked his interest.

At least if she and Anakin were together, they were more likely pleasure-bent than held hostage. Of course that left the equally problematic issue of why the pair would up and disappear so suddenly, together.

He just hoped for Anakin's sake it wasn't what he suspected they'd been doing for some time now.

A quick montage flashed through his mind. Anakin's behaviour towards her so long ago, a single hug and kiss shared between them after that horrendous battle with Dooku. The generally upbeat cheery person Anakin had become. Like he was content to know that something better was always just around the corner.

Or, as Obi-Wan was loathed to think, waiting back on Coruscant for Anakin with a hug and less chaste kisses than he'd witnessed.

Knowing that he'd have to face the truth one way or another Obi-Wan climbed out of his starfighter onto the smooth floor.

A flight controller quickly rushed to him, bowing politely.

"May I help you Master Kenobi?"

Obi-Wan nodded his head and folded his hands into his sleeves.

"Has Senator Amidala returned to Naboo recently?"

The tall woman turned her head down to a datapad in her hands and hit a few buttons.

"Not in the past month," she replied.

Looking at the floor for a moment he pondered her answer.

"How do you determine that?" he finally asked.

The woman looked taken aback at his question. He could tell she was overwhelmed by his status and tried to calm her with the force. Her rationality was needed now as the starting point to finding his wayward friend.

If indeed he was wayward and not rotting in a prison or worse right now.

The flight controller cleared her throat and answered confidently

"The system checks for use of her landing clearance codes and her ship's unique beacon. Neither have been used Master Jedi."

Obi-Wan grimaced. *Blast.*

His fingers reached for his beard without thinking and he tugged the shortened hairs in thought.

If they were here secretly they'd put in at least a basic effort to disguise it. If they weren't here then he had absolutely no clue where to look for them.

If he was even looking for them. He could just be looking for Anakin. This mission was far too broad for his liking.

“Did you check civilian docking bays as well?”

She nodded but then told him confidently “If the Senator’s ship was planetside she would dock with priority here. For security reasons.”

It’s likely she has an enamoured Jedi with her. Security is not a problem Obi-Wan considered grimly.

“I’d like to leave my ship here. Will that be a problem?”

“No sir.”

“Would it be possible to get entry to both civilian and military flight logs for the past five weeks?”

She led him across the floor in silence to a terminal and brought up the relevant records.

“Thank you. You’ve been most helpful.”

She bowed and left him to it. He would have laughed at her relief to get away from him. Except he was well aware of the tediousness of the task that awaited him in scrolling through thousands of data entries hoping one would pop out at him. Plus, he never laughed at the frightened.

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

Anakin leapt out of their small craft and carefully tied it to the public dock.

“I’ll leave the supplies to you,” Padmé told him as he reached his hand down to her.

“What will you do?” was his inquisitive reply.

Very carefully he helped her out of the rocking boat and onto the steadier pier.

As she surveyed the town he couldn’t stop himself from eyeing her. She looked completely different. It was on purpose of course, she was lightly disguised to keep her from being recognised. With her hair down and pulled back from her face by a single simple clip she looked nothing like Queen Amidala and bore only a faint resemblance to Naboo’s Senator. Right now she didn’t look like, no she wasn’t either of those women. She was the Padmé that before had only existed for him. Long curls flowing, obviously pregnant, and quite happy. Senator Amidala had never been happy.

Senator Amidala wasn’t allowed to love.

“I’m going to wander the shops.”

She dug into her pocket and withdrew a handful of credits.

“I’ll stick close to the square, you can find me when you’re done,” she briefly pressed her hand to his cheek as she handed over the currency.

He caught her around the waist and pulled her back to him, burying his face in her neck.

“If you have any problems with people thinking they know who you are, com me and I’ll come help.”

She nodded to his whispered offer then pulled away.

He got down on his knees and leaned back into their small waterspeeder, clasping a small bag. The crisp morning air dragged against his throat as he took breaths but he couldn’t care less. Like Padmé, he was someone completely different here too. For so long he’d been viewed as the Jedi. Right now no title preceded him, no expectations. He was as insignificant as the next person, though he didn’t thrill at the prospect of being a nobody. There was one redeeming feature of hiding though — all he was here was Padmé’s. He didn’t have to hide that fact, and he didn’t have to listen to his masters. All he had to listen to was his heart.

Standing up he slung the bag over his shoulder and confidently strode down the dock. Just Padmé’s. He liked that. He’d never been allowed to show that he belonged to her before. With light steps he headed towards the clearly signed food market.

Padmé was still within his site as he took his time to enjoy the fresh day. The decent-sized village was not over-crowded but people did move about tending to their business, chatting, eating breakfast at small tables on the pavements.

Right then Anakin took pleasure in gazing at her when she wasn't aware. She moved gracefully among the townspeople, stopping to gaze thoughtfully into a display window as she passed. He reached the entrance to the well-lit emporium and didn't hesitate to step inside but his heart and mind were with her.

He pulled out her list and almost immediately reached up to grab the first item. The image of her so independent of every other person in the square was still with him though.

This was a side of her he'd never quite experienced and he loved it. She took her time to enjoy small things that she never would have noticed before, like shop windows, views, and if he was correct in what he'd caught her doing yesterday: fragrant flowers.

There was the next thing. He pulled down the small bottle and paused. Oddly enough, Anakin couldn't remember them arguing once since they'd arrived, though they'd been living on top of each other and on previous occasions would have been assured of getting on each other's nerves. Of course, that wasn't just her. He had to acknowledge a certain degree of change in himself there too.

Most of his mind pleasantly occupied with the enjoyment of their present and near future plans, he did reach into the small sack for a second chip with the auxiliary list stored on it. His hand brushed over his lightsaber but he ignored the weapon. It was only there in case of an emergency. Instead he pulled out the list she'd made and started scrolling through it, finding the other items one by one.

It didn't take long for the mundane tasks to force him into his own thoughts for entertainment. Unfortunately, it was Dooku that haunted him again. The man pleading for mercy, that feeling of *conflict* that had overtaken him. There should have been no conflict. There was only one path — mercy — and he hadn't taken it. Why hadn't he taken it?

Sadly he acknowledged that in that one moment where he was unsure he had trusted Chancellor Palpatine's appraisal. And even though he was a good man, Anakin knew he should have discarded the politician's opinion. He was a Jedi, he didn't, he *shouldn't* rely on popular opinion to guide his ethics.

In the middle of one aisle he stood stock-still and closed his eyes sadly. He shouldn't, but he had. And look where it had led. The Separatist leader was dead, yes. But he should have stood trial, been forced to live out his days in a cell. He had already yielded in defeat.

Anakin had killed after surrender had been given. How was he any better than the murdering Sith Dooku had been?

His eyes opened again and he moved more slowly as he consulted the list, gathering oddly shaped fruits into a basket. This time it wasn't the shock it had been before when he saw dark mist begin to cloud his body. He stood immobile for just a second and watched in fascination. It seemed to come from his skin once more, but wafted out, unable to return to him.

His heart felt lighter, still not quite understanding the phenomenon but pleased to see it gone none the less. With a small smile, he left behind the angst of Dooku's death among the bright colours of autumnal vegetables.

By the time he had collected all the goods and handed over most of the hard credits she'd issued him his hands were laden with bags of supplies. He glanced around the small

boutiques that surrounded the open square on three sides and decided that perhaps they would stay here a little longer. They were in no rush to get back. With that decision made he headed back to the wharf and lowered the supplies to the cargo hold.

Pausing, he eyed the small bag. It was awfully frustrating to have one of his shoulders occupied with the small strap all the time.

He withdrew his lightsaber from the bag and left that to the storage locker too. Now he just needed to attach it to himself, inconspicuously.

Quickly glancing around he appraised the situation. There was lots of heavy-duty maritime rope. A thick covering blanket for exposed passengers was tucked under one seat. He spotted colour: caught on the edge of one seat were a few lengths of cloth where someone had obviously gotten caught once and ripped quite a length from something, probably a dress.

This was the first time in the weeks since he'd stopped wearing his utility belt that he actually had a use for it.

Shrugging to himself he reached in and coaxed free the dress hem.

Anakin was inventive enough to wrap the straps around a number of times and conceal the lightsaber on his thigh. High up and underneath layers of clothing he hoped no one would notice. It wouldn't be as easy to access as it had been in the small bag. And it ultimately still felt strange not to have it dangling at his hip. But he was becoming accustomed to having no reason to call on his weapon. Hopefully there would be no need to retrieve it from his thigh.

It only took a few presses of a keypad to lock the supplies away and then hoist himself up from the dock.

Once more free of any burdens of expectation he set himself a small mission. To find Padmé without having to use his com. He stretched out his feelings and started meandering back to where people for the most part congregated.

The ancient cobblestones rocked beneath his feet as he strolled into the plaza. Feeling a very vague tugging of the force he continued to walk straight ahead, to the far side. Here seemed to be bathed in the morning sunshine and he absorbed it. Let it warm his hair and his back as he felt her presence in his awareness strengthening.

That shop. The small one with lots of pastel fabric in the window. That was it.

Without a thought he confidently strode in the open doorway.

Padmé knew she must look very odd to the shop assistant.

Mothers were supposed to obsess over the pretty accessories made so small for babies; she'd seen it many times. For some reason she wasn't one of those people. Padmé Amidala just couldn't bring herself to squeal over anything. Quite frankly, she didn't care what anyone thought of her. And this shop full of teeny clothes was failing to bring it out.

"We've just gotten the softest winter blankets. Would you like to see?" the woman asked hesitantly.

“Yes please,” Padmé agreed offhandedly.

“So how far along are you?” the assistant asked, trying to strike up a conversation.

She may not be overly eager about clothes but her baby was a different story. Looking up from the tiny booties she was fingering Padmé grinned to the voice that had disappeared into the back of the shop.

“Five and a half months,” she called back.

Her hands travelled over the short stacks of small clothes thoughtfully. She looked up to see if the owner had returned, but to no avail. To entertain herself she tugged at a few pieces whose muted colours caught her eye.

Laying them out along the counter she cautiously traced the pockets for small feet and openings for tiny hands.

“Here they are,” the voice startled her as it suddenly reappeared.

She only gave the clothes she’d been coveting a fleeting thought as she brushed them to the side and made room on the counter top for the blankets.

Reaching up with her palm she felt the supposed softness of the perfect squares.

Her eyes widened as she kept stroking appreciatively.

“They’re very soft,” she agreed quietly.

Padmé’s thoughts drifted to their newborn baby. Wrapped up tightly with one of these unbelievably delicate materials caressing up against its skin. Babbling as it rested comfortably in Anakin’s arms. The Anakin in her mind looked up to smile happily at her. Her heart fluttering a little, she looked over the pile of blankets appraisingly.

“I might have one of these,” her private smile was directed at the floor as she let the image of Anakin fill her mind.

The shop lady nodded and smiled a “I thought you might.”

Suspicious, Padmé covertly glanced up to eye the woman. Surely she hadn’t guessed Padmé’s true identity? What did that mean — ‘I thought you might’?

Not wanting to arouse undue suspicion in case it was just an offhanded comment she returned her eyes to the blankets. She wouldn’t allow her over-cautiousness to ruin the so-far pleasant experience and tugged out a few colours she liked.

“I like these three.”

Padmé looked between them, trying to decide which she was more partial to. They were all the colour of a different meadow flower and she couldn’t choose a favourite. Her eyes closed briefly as a small thought popped into her mind.

This was the first thing she would buy for it. When Sola had been pregnant with Ryoo she was constantly acquiring things. Little socks, outfits, hats, blankets, toys; Padmé was less than three months out and didn’t have a single thing.

Looking over the selection of little rugs now, she felt a sudden nervousness. She literally liked them all equally.

"I can't really decide," she confessed, then baulked as she thought that she was going to need lots of these little things.

And since she had absolutely nothing so far, she'd be best to make a decent start.

"I'll take all three," came the decision.

The owner grinned knowingly at her and put away the rest of the stack.

Knowing because she'd been through this routine with others before, or because she knew she had scandalous gossip on her hands? Padmé's hands fingered the little rugs then dug into her pockets for the credits she'd stuffed in there.

"Anything else? One of the little suits, perhaps?" the assistant's kind voice asked.

Padmé looked guiltily towards the baby clothes she'd picked out before.

"I shouldn't," she frowned at them as she pulled them back across the counter.

She didn't want to be that mother, who impulse bought every little thing that caught her eye. But they were so very beautiful.

The assistant remained quiet, folding the blankets up and digging around under the counter for a bag.

One little white shape called out to her and eventually she decided it was too sweet to pass up.

"I'll have this one too," she firmly announced.

"Wonderful."

The woman took the cloth shape from Padmé and began putting the rest away.

"So, is daddy excited?" the woman asked as she took the credits Padmé offered across.

A soft tinkling chime filled the shop. They both turned to the doorway to see whose arrival it was announcing.

Anakin's head was just ducking into the small shop and looking around in surprise.

"I'm not sure," Padmé answered the assistant truthfully.

The woman's eyes widened as Anakin walked up to the desk. His fingers danced lightly up Padmé's back in a silent greeting.

"What are you buying?" he asked quietly, eyeing the opaque bag the woman was handing her.

"You're the father?" the woman asked in disbelief.

Anakin's head whipped up to the shop owner. Her tone made him question what she knew about them. But he didn't feel any particular stirring in the force so he let it go.

She seemed to relax and finished handing Padmé her purchases.

"Thank you," Padmé politely accepted.

She turned to leave and Anakin's arm immediately dropped away.

"Good luck with your baby!" the woman gleefully called just as they were exiting.

It was too much for Anakin. He couldn't leave such a person without knowing if she threatened their secret. His meditation this morning had left him feeling it was important that they remain hidden. And he was starting to truly trust his feelings once again.

He tugged Padmé to a stop and let her stand in confusion for a moment. Turning, he focused on the woman and for a brief second closed his eyes to sink into the force. He concentrated very hard on reading the woman's intent. She truly wished them luck, nothing more. She hadn't recognised Padmé.

"Thank you," he said quietly, accepting her good wishes then turning and tugging Padmé out into the sunshine.

"Did she suspect?" Padmé asked as she hurriedly pulled up her hood.

All of her previous freedom had disappeared and she was feeling nervous again. She didn't want to be recognised, not now. She liked this time of being perceived as normal. Of being left alone. Being with Anakin.

He pulled her to a stop as she hurried away from the shop. She gave a small smile as he took both her hands and lifted them to his heart.

"Padmé," he began, pushing her hood back and watching lovingly as her tresses fell free. "No one suspects and I'll alter their perceptions just enough if they think they do. Relax. You're allowed to be happy."

He kissed her hair then released her.

"She thought I was too young," he explained softly and her shoulders sunk in relief.

He laughed quietly to himself, asking her "Shall we sit and eat and you can tell me what you bought?"

"Why are you laughing?" she asked, standing stock-still as he eyed a small establishment nearby.

Anakin turned his attention back to her, mischief dancing over his features. He hadn't looked this carefree in months.

"I'm not too young to die at war for them" he gestured around generally "but I'm too young to do this."

He flickered his gaze down to her belly briefly then back up to grin knowingly. ‘Yes, that’s how she got pregnant’ was clearly written all over his face.

“Stop it Anakin,” she chastised quietly.

He tried hard to wipe the smirk off his face and only partially succeeded.

“Lunch?” he pressed instead.

“You and me. Sit to eat?” she asked in astonishment.

“Yes, why not?”

She shook her head.

“We haven’t before, that’s all.”

“We haven’t been pregnant before, that doesn’t mean we aren’t.”

She grinned at his simplistic logic and let herself be tugged towards the mouth-watering smells.

Obi-Wan glanced out the large hanger-bay doors to the sinking sun. This was the beginning of his fifth hour at the terminal and still, nothing caught his attention. Beside him his R4 unit was plugged in and scanning too, but it was hard to program a droid to pick up on the small quirks of Anakin’s personality.

That’s what he was looking for. A falsified record with some unique calling card that marked it as tampered with by Anakin. But he’d already passed by the timeframe where they would have arrived. He was starting to abandon hope that he could identify when and where his friend had landed.

But if he was working on the assumption that Anakin had snuck in on the Senator’s ship, then the likelihood was he had docked in the civilian hanger. A better plan would be to go there in person and feel for Anakin, or indeed the Senator’s lingering presence.

Their ship may even still be there.

At the very least he could interview the flight controllers. If Anakin had tampered with their minds it would be easier to detect.

Obi-Wan stood determinedly, stretching his rigid muscles to familiarise them with movement again.

“Come on R4,” he said quietly, making for the exit.

Continuing his search this evening would be pointless — since most traffic moved planetside during the daylight hours to avoid collision, he could assume most of the controllers worked to coincide with this, during the day.

He would find no more clues tonight, he would be better off finding some food and accommodation, and visiting the hangers in the morning. It was likely he was going to need a lot of patience on this assignment.

They stood from the light meal and strolled casually back to their small boat.

Padmé lingered as they passed a local tributary statue. The politician inside her couldn't shut down completely and she felt compelled to honour the small village's local memorial.

She stood reading the inscription then studying the statue, even if the townspeople didn't know she was doing it.

By her side Anakin just waited quietly. He allowed her generally curious nature to find out to whom her planet was indebted, for whatever reason.

Savouring the feeling of her hand tucked firmly into his own, he stood patiently. He couldn't help having his own attention captured every now and then by particularly intricate local architecture or people walking path with some very interesting emotions being broadcast into his awareness.

When she was finished she started walking again and he moved with her.

"I don't think I've touched you so much in my life," Padmé mentioned flippantly.

Anakin continued to brush his thumb back and forth across her fingers, but at that comment gave her hand a brief squeeze too.

They continued on, taking in the interesting people and colourful displays.

But one store caught both their attentions. And it was Anakin who stopped them in front of it.

"We need some of this," he said quietly.

He wanted to draw her into his arms but it still irked against his nature. Being with Padmé whenever he wanted, including in public, was something he'd always longed for. Only, now that he had the opportunity — he didn't know how.

Tentatively he pulled her towards him, placing his hands on her shoulders.

She grinned at him, the public display foremost in her mind.

Quietly pondering the shopfront she covered his hand and held it to her lovingly. Her attention moved down to the swelling that had drawn many passing comments already today. All had been pleasant enquiries about her baby and she was more excited about the prospect of its arrival after one day of well wishes than in the first five months.

He gave her shoulder a soft rub absentmindedly and she lit up in a grin.

"Come on," she decided before they could stand too long and lose enthusiasm.

"Really?" he grinned, lacing his fingers into hers as they wandered through into the bright room.

"What can I help you with?" a young red-haired man asked, emerging with his hands wiping clean on a rag.

"We need —" Anakin started and Padmé finished for him with a soft smile

“Paint.”

“Master Jedi, this is the last controller employed to direct traffic in and out of Theed’s ports.”

Obi-Wan acknowledged the trembling young man with a small dip of his head.

“Do you remember any other Jedi Knight passing through here recently?”

The controller shook his head nervously in answer as Obi-Wan extended his abilities. He was searching the other man for signs of tampering, of any force-laced suggestion recently planted in his mind.

But like all the others, this one held no clues. If Anakin had done anything, it was too subtle to find.

Frowning for a brief moment Obi-Wan had to admit defeat.

“You’ve been most helpful,” he inclined his head to the administrator.

Without another word he walked away.

Strolling along the rows of private and public hanger bays he allowed himself to think.

No evidence of Anakin lingered in the flight records. His force-presence had either never been here or forcibly dimmed when Anakin passed through the bustling port. If the Senator’s ship had been here, it too was gone.

He froze in place and stretched his capacity to maximum. Still he couldn’t feel the force tugging him any particular direction, or to any particular ship.

Anakin, if he was here, had hidden himself very very well. He did not want to be found.

Which was bad luck, because whatever he was running from, he couldn’t hide now. Obi-Wan would find his friend, of that he was sure.

Perhaps he shouldn’t be focusing on Anakin at all. The young knight had learnt how to cover his tracks from the word go. Perhaps he should be focusing on the Senator instead. She was a native of Naboo, she must have family here somewhere. And maybe just perhaps he’d get lucky and find she’d left them a message to tell them she was alright.

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

Padmé woke blissfully late and feeling very well rested.

Not quite realising the time she rolled to her side with a contented grin, squinting open her eyes to look out the doorway. The light curtains fluttered in the breeze as usual but she couldn't see Anakin standing out there meditating. Since that was where he was most mornings she sat up to peer further around the corner.

Still no sign of his athletic form.

Curious, Padmé threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. She walked out onto the balcony to make sure he wasn't cleverly concealed by the growing vines. When she didn't find him she stood quietly for a moment and contemplated the lovely view.

With all the beauty in front of her she tried to ignore the tugging back towards her open office door and the com station just beyond it. Her eyes drifted over the natural wonders that surrounded their retreat.

Then she snapped her head around and walked calmly back inside. Pulling up the latest bulletins on Senate debates.

Sadly she quickly deciphered what she was reading. The galaxy was falling apart. She didn't know if she would have seen it when she was on Coruscant, but from this distance she could see it quite clearly. The Chancellor had asked for the power she'd predicted he would, and giving one man executive power over the military did not seem wise. The proposal was up for debate in the senate today and she made a note to watch the HoloNet feed of it.

Flicking past that news report, she called up the next one.

Thirty-two. The number of Jedi killed yesterday was thirty-two. Her heart seized. Very briefly the thought *oh please no, where is he?* overtook her. Adrenaline pumped into her, making her feel nauseous. Then she remembered where she was. And why. And with who.

He's downstairs. He's alright.

Gasping for air she drew in deep breaths, feeling guilty for the absolute panic that had just flooded through her. Too high. That number was far too high. Trying to breathe deeply she forced herself to lie back against her chair and close her eyes.

She wasn't going to be sick. She'd just gotten used to not feeling nauseous all the time, she wasn't going to let it back in now. Still, she didn't stop feeling guilt-ridden that she could only feel thankful her own Jedi was safe from harm. That she didn't have to worry for more than a split second about him lying dead somewhere and never finding out.

It was a horrible feeling she had carried for the past four and a half years. Checking casualty lists was an experience no one should have to go through.

She pushed a button to stop feeding her the news. Culpability ate away at her. For all those deaths it had to be wondered: if she wasn't keeping one of their most talented away from the front lines, would so many would be losing their lives?

Shaking her head away from such morbid thoughts she stood, returning to their bedroom and quickly throwing her robe over her shoulders.

"Anakin?" she called into the vast and empty hallway.

No reply.

He's alright. He's around somewhere. He's not one of them. He's not dead. Don't panic.

She had to absolutely force herself to walk at a steady pace. The rational part of her brain kept telling her he was fine. She had to stop letting her emotions run her like they had the whole time she'd been here.

Focusing on a more basic need, she let hunger tug her towards the kitchen. The large doors were open and the path down to the sparkling lake beckoned her enticingly.

"Anakin?" she called, walking just outside and calling loudly.

He could be anywhere.

He's somewhere. He's alright. Be rational. Think.

She took another steadying breath. He would be... most likely in the workroom if he hadn't heard her before.

"I'm in the baby's room," his muffled voice eventually came back.

"Baby's room?" she muttered to herself.

Still, her tense body slowly started releasing its tension. She snagged a fruit from the bowl of them on the counter as she passed, sinking her teeth into it. Chewing hungrily she made her way down the grand corridor to Anakin's voice.

The furniture was all sitting in the hallway when she approached. Poking her head around the door she found the room almost empty and much larger than she remembered.

"Oh thank you!" she grinned, walking in and turning around to study it.

"We had to get started sometime," he shrugged.

She knew he was pleased with her reaction as he picked up the final piece, a chair, and lifted it out into the corridor.

"I'm going to find a gravsled and haul this stuff into the storage shed. We can start by painting today if you like."

"Yes. I would."

She walked to the now open window and looked out wistfully.

The smell of fresh herbs drifted in on the air and swirled around the bright room. It was airy and light, and would be more so once the colour was changed.

"It's perfect," she mused softly.

He reappeared suddenly at her side. He too looked out the window at the gardens before them, trying not to think of the situation they'd left behind.

"I know."

Anakin looked at her sideways, then bit his lip and turned back to the view.

"You can tell me," she coaxed him with a small smile.

"I like it here. We —"

He paused to grin naughtily.

"*Sleep* more."

"Anakin!" she chided loudly as he deliberately avoided her gaze.

Her voice carried in the small, now empty room and echoed. Beside her his grin turned wicked. She watched him bend over to lean his elbows on the windowsill, quite content with himself.

Being a Jedi had its perks. You could read the emotions of most beings in your vicinity. You could influence the thoughts of the weak minded. People commanded you respect before they even met you.

And if you wanted to know the whereabouts of a senator's family, all you had to do was ask.

Obi-Wan checked the information he'd been given at the Royal Palace one more time. Their names were Jobal and Ruwee Nabberrie, they were Senator Amidala's parents and apparently this was their home in Theed.

He'd never thought to wonder if her name was ceremonial, if she'd been born with another. He could place credits on Anakin knowing that little fact though.

Those two were far too close.

Reprimanding himself for thinking about it again Obi-Wan pushed his musings on the nature of their relationship out of his mind. Instead he focused as Qui Gon had once insisted, on the here and now.

He walked the small flight of steps to the front door and pressed the small announcer. It didn't take long for a woman to appear and open the door.

"Hello," she greeted warmly.

She left him to announce his intentions himself.

He bowed slightly to her, beginning the introductions with "Hello. I am Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Her eyebrows furrowed and he could immediately sense how much he'd frightened her. She feared the worst.

Which did not bode well. He was hoping she'd know where the Senator was. Dread indicated ignorance of her daughter's whereabouts. Still, he'd best press on.

"I'm looking for the Naberrie family, I need to talk to their daughter," he pressed.

She looked like he'd flustered her even more. This was a wretched beginning. Still, she seemed to compose herself admirably and stood back from the doorway.

"I'm Jobal Naberrie. Please come inside."

He nodded his thanks and allowed her to direct him to a small sitting room.

"I assume you need to talk to Padmé," she dove into a conversation before he could start.

He nodded, feeling it was best to let her guide the conversation around waters she was comfortable in.

"Our understanding was that she was on Coruscant at the moment. I'm afraid you've come all this way for nothing Master Jedi."

Blast.

So she hadn't contacted her parents when she disappeared. Which was not helpful. It could mean she'd been kidnapped and had no time to send any communications. Or it could mean she had disappeared with Anakin and was continuing to cover her tracks. Either option did not bode well for her future.

He obviously took a little too long in replying to her statement because the senator's mother clearly started to panic.

"Are you finding it difficult to locate her?" Jobal asked him, with detachment worthy of praise.

Obi-Wan did not take it upon himself to deliberately mislead when asked for information. This woman would attempt to contact Padmé as soon as he left anyway, she may as well hear from him that her daughter couldn't be found.

"Yes it would appear so. We thought perhaps she may have left word with you on her movements."

He held himself confidently as she eyed him thoughtfully. She seemed to hold a wisdom befitting the mother of the compassionate and intelligent Senator he knew. Still, if Amidala had truly followed Anakin on whatever escapade he was contenting himself with, perhaps he'd have to rethink the esteem he held her in.

Calculatingly, with humanity he didn't often encounter, Jobal questioned "Was her leaving sudden?"

It appeared a simple inquiry but he could see how much she might deduce from such a question. He had a feeling glossing over the answer would do more harm than good in this situation.

"Quite," he plainly replied.

"Do you think something has happened to her?" she shot back at him immediately.

He bowed his head in acquiescence.

Yes, something had happened. Whether it was a bounty hunter, disgruntled spice miners on the moons of Naboo, a fanatical supporter of Palpatine who'd taken their loyalty a little too far, or a deviant infatuated Jedi remained to be seen.

"I take it that you coming here to ask her family indicates that there has been no trace of her elsewhere?"

His silence gave her enough answer. She was becoming frantic and he was beginning to feel coming here was a mistake. He'd simply panicked Senator Amidala's mother without procuring any information at all.

"You'll forgive me, I had to try," he began to take his leave, standing.

Jobal followed him to the door in silence, and as he was stepping out asked a question he'd rather she hadn't.

"Has there been a ransom demand?"

Obi-Wan paused in pulling up his hood, his eyes locking with her briefly. He didn't answer her plea, which almost immediately confirmed to the mother that the situation was that serious.

"Forgive me m'lady, I didn't mean to trouble you," were his parting words.

He left her standing on the steps, her hands pressed to her mouth in a silent sob as he left without another peep.

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

Obi-Wan found accommodation near the Senator's home. Anakin was not a patient man, whatever he was doing it would come to light quickly, of this Obi-Wan was sure.

But all the same, he was prepared to wait. Being near the Nabberies seemed a good idea, in case Senator Amidala visited them in person.

It didn't take long for the path ahead to reveal itself. He'd only been there one week when he awoke to a beeping com in the middle of the night.

Something told him he would like to hear what they had to say. Not that it would be Anakin himself, or even an explanation of his whereabouts, but just the smallest tid-bit of information could be useful.

He patched the communication through to the holoprojector and crossed his legs in front of him.

"Master Kenobi," a knight bowed to him.

Obi-Wan nodded politely to the unknown figure.

"I am Kabets," he greeted. "I work in the archives. Council assigned me to help you with your requests."

Obi-Wan appraised the knight quietly. This must be the temple's most accomplished when it came to ciphers, the council would assign no less.

"I have been able to uncover two partial transactions from Senator Amidala's bank account."

Obi-Wan nodded silently. His hopes buoyed considerably — another clue was just what he needed.

"They are well-concealed and it has taken me eighteen standard days to piece together the evidence I have. I doubt I will be able to procure further information but will keep trying.

"Very well, tell me what you know now," Obi-Wan understood.

"The first is a large conversion to hard credits done on Malastare twenty standard days ago."

Obi-Wan reached his fingers to his beard automatically. That immediately didn't ring true.

"Are you sure of that?" he inquired.

"Only the amount."

Nodding, Obi-Wan thought about that for a moment. Anakin had only gone missing twenty-two standard days ago. He, and the Senator, couldn't have made it much beyond

Naboo in that time, let alone as far as Malastare. It was possible the location had been falsified.

“I had a lucky break with the other transaction. I know for sure a sum was transferred to a droid company on Naboo,” Kabets assured him.

“Intriguing. Is that all?”

“Yes Master Kenobi.”

“Alright, thank you for your assistance.”

The knight bowed and the transmission ended.

Physical credits made sense — once you had them you couldn’t be traced. But a droid factory?

For most people indulging in physical work for the bulk of their morning would leave them drained, exhausted.

For Anakin, it was routine. The difference was, in the Jedi temple physical exercise had been coupled with the mental. Connecting the inner being with the movements of the outer. Trying to release into the will of the force while focusing on complicated motions that pushed the body to the extreme. Downstairs, in the baby’s freshly brightened room, there was plenty of physical exercise.

He strained to turn a screw as he held the side of a ceiling-reaching wardrobe with his free hand.

His mind, however, was left to wander. Doing more contemplation than when he physically set out to do it. Without consciously meditating he analysed and reanalysed the events that had transpired since he’d become a knight. And more and more he didn’t like what he saw.

As he searched on the floor for a nut he’d just dropped, he saw himself calling on the force for immediate power. Rather than considering the wider ranging consequences he’d been so desperate he had dashed headfirst down the quick and easy path.

Finding the small metal chunk rolled under a length of wood he considered that every time he’d fumbled for whatever grasp on the force he could get, it seemed to pull away a little bit from who he really was. He thought of himself as a hero. Heroes shouldn’t be so scared they called on the nearest and easiest device to attain conquest. Heroes should take the harder but more fulfilling path.

Certainly Padmé would not be proud of some of the things he’d done. That disgusted him almost more than anything else.

He spun the nut on, tightening it where it belonged.

Dedicating himself to the mundane tasks of preparing the baby’s room was making him feel much less like the hero he’d always thought himself to be.

Almost unconsciously he linked his own place in the universe with the ones he'd slain. He saw himself making rash decisions, triumphing at the fall of enemies. They were ultimately beings too, who were now forever stripped of their lives. Perhaps they had people waiting for them at home. Pushing with all his strength, waiting for the corners to click together he was loathed to think that even one of those he'd killed had a loved one waiting at home as Padmé had been for him.

He drew back and viewed his completed work with a sense of satisfaction. For all his dark musings he'd actually felt unburdened of some of the actions of his past. Just as lying in the meadow had reconnected him to the force a few weeks ago, so had confronting his behaviour breathed new life into him.

While he was preparing their new life's space. He liked that the two were linked — almost as if he was removing the stain of the past to start afresh for their youngling.

There was one aspect of the room that turned his stomach over though. Like he had been all morning, he tried to ignore the two silent birthing droids standing motionlessly in one corner. They represented the less pleasant side of the forthcoming experience. The part he really didn't want to think about.

His eyes stayed averted but finally they were drawn back like a magnet to the twin droids.

"In case one breaks down" he'd said with a detached, pragmatic air when they ordered them. But now, with their identical dead eyes staring at him, they sent shivers down his spine. It wasn't his reading of the force, he knew that much. It was his own fear for Padmé. It was really time he snuck off with a datapad and read up on birth — because at the moment he could only wince when he imagined how the baby was going to get *out of* Padmé.

With a quick dive and a soft grunt he pushed the droids into the empty cupboard and slammed the door shut behind them.

Now they were hidden. He could just enjoy the pleasantness of being pregnant without having to face the images of, well, *that*.

A soft ping sounded from the kitchen and he turned his head in automatic response. The food prep was finished. Leaving the little one's room behind Anakin scrambled, climbing the staircase to the second floor eagerly and shaking off the unpleasantness of what he'd locked up in the baby's wardrobe.

As he strode comfortably up the cool corridor he made for their bedroom with a light-hearted step he'd not had in years.

"Padmé!" he called, without even reaching out to her with the force.

Her presence was now such a constant in his life. He loved that.

As he rounded their doorway he paused briefly, then chuckled at her slightly raised, disoriented head.

"Were you asleep?" he asked in disbelief, getting up on the bed and sitting himself down at her side.

She swallowed and blinked a few times.

“Of course not,” she tried to assure.

Her voice was not quite complete, a little hoarse, giving her away.

He perched next to her for a moment, beaming from his height as he watched her awaken fully.

“Lunch is ready,” he finally told her lightly.

He clambered back onto his feet and held out his hand to her.

As she eventually made it to her feet he slipped his hands down, resting them on her waist. He stayed silent, now feeling her slight disorientation through the force. Still, he rested his chin on her head and just waited.

Standing quietly with her soft breathing his rhythmic focusing point he allowed himself to become aware of what was really going on. He was a man of action, daring stunts and adventure. None of which he’d seen in more than a month.

Much as he wanted to, Padmé wouldn’t allow him to narrow his focus until it contained only her. If anything, she had her own problems she was keeping from him. Soon enough he would confront her about those. But right now he had to understand, and he did, that he was turning his attentions to the nursery downstairs for one simple reason.

Balance.

If he was going to face up to the problems in his life, the darkness and horror and despair and loss that he’d lived through, then he wanted something positive and loving and hopeful to act as a counterpoint. It was why he couldn’t stand to have the realities of the coming all-too-messy event taunting him while worked.

Overall, though, focusing on the baby’s room was just what he needed. A safe place to meditate without fearing of exposing Padmé to the lingering darkness. A place to calm himself and face up to his past.

Taking a deep breath he acknowledged the truth, then let it go. Lunch was ready, and Padmé was awake.

All the times he’d hurried into things before, he had made decisions he now regretted. Right now, he wanted to slow down, he *needed* to slow down.

There were many things in life to be savoured. Padmé sleepily resting against his chest with the cooling of a late autumn day shining outside their bedroom was one of those things.

At present the only problems he faced were inside his own head. The rest of the universe was so very far away.

He was so close, he could just feel it.

Obi-Wan stood outside the shipping office with his arms folded. He tried not to pause, tried to keep his breathing even. He shouldn’t get too excited, but it was hard. The two droids the Senator had paid for, he still didn’t know what make or model, or the purpose in buying

them since Anakin had proved quite skilled in building such things himself given time. He'd tracked that shipment of droids successfully to this outpost.

Charging inside he made his way over to a terminal. A little manipulation and instead of asking him for his name and order number, it was asking which shipment records he'd like to pull up.

He scrolled eagerly through the logs, stopping in great surprise. The record of their arrival still existed! She, at least, was here then! His eyes jumped to the address the delivery service would have moved the package on to.

Closing his eyes briefly he tried to clam himself. To his great consternation he found this lead to end like all the others. In the address field flashed the word 'pickup'. Instead of being further delivered to an individual residence, as most goods would have been, this particular parcel was retrieved in person.

He flickered his attention to the claimant, not hoping for much. The name wasn't familiar on the acceptance agreement, but he didn't really expect it to be. Cliegg Lars could be anyone, including a name faked by Anakin.

Closing off from the falsified login he left the terminal as he'd found it and tried not to stomp down the front stairs and back out into the open.

He turned and did his best to not glare at the building. It was hard. Here was where the trail to Anakin went cold. Not cold like all his other leads so far but absolutely Hoth-ice freezing.

What had to have ruined it for him was that Obi-Wan had briefly allowed his excitement to overtake him. He'd wanted the search to culminate in this place, it just felt right.

There was only one thing to do. Be thorough.

Senator Amidala had ordered dispatch to the shipping office. She may have been into another establishment. One of the dress shops, the town hall, the real estate agent, any one! He would only know by asking.

With determination renewed he paced himself, surveying the small shopping village then turning to an open doorway. Although it was painstaking he started at one side and slowly made his way around the open square.

He carefully asked for memories of someone looking like Anakin or Senator Amidala. Occasionally he had to use the force to coax cooperation but for the most part the people were simple and friendly.

While no one remembered seeing anyone nearly as important as the Queen and Senator, two things re-energized him.

The first was a larger store that sold fresh food supplies. Here he would unknowingly find his most powerful ally in the search for his dashing handsome young friend.

Teenage girls.

A pair of them worked near the store entrance, chatting freely with one another as they waited to assist customers.

Obi-Wan cleared his throat, folded his arms into his sleeves and stood waiting.

They immediately quieted and turned to him, polite smiles on their faces.

“Can I help you?” the first asked.

“Perhaps. I’m looking for a friend of mine. He may have passed through here: tall, wavy light hair —”

Obi-Wan’s eyebrows lifted in surprise as the first one sighed and her dark haired friend cut him off.

“Wide shoulders, dreamy blue eyes, sexy scar over his right eye?”

“Yes the very same,” he tried not to show his enthusiasm. “Have you seen him?”

They eyed him with an air of suspicion and he couldn’t really blame them. But this was the first time someone had confirmed a sighting of Anakin and he needed every piece of information they could give him. So he subtly tried to assure them through the force that they wanted to help him.

“We’ve seen him. He’s fearful handsome,” the first one giggled.

“And his smile — I feel like I’m going to die when he smiles!”

“Recently?” he pressed, suppressing the urge to roll his eyes at them.

There were more worthwhile things in the galaxy than Anakin’s physical attributes to focus attentions on.

“He’s only been in here a handful of times, in the past month I think. I’d never seen him before then.”

Looking around more carefully Obi-Wan took note of the general stock displayed.

“He’s got such soft hair!”

“I know! I always want to play with it. It’s a perfect length for putting your fingers through.”

Trying to steer the conversation away from the annoyance of the finer points of Anakin’s hair Obi-Wan asked

“Do you remember what he bought?”

“Shuura fruit!” they exclaimed in unison then laughed loudly.

Why was it that the first real lead he had was from teenagers? He was trying to conduct a serious investigation, and their obvious infatuation with Anakin, while helpful, was frustrating.

“He forgot it once, muttered about cravings for it and had to dash back and get a whole case while we were sorting out the rest of his order. It’s been our favourite for two weeks because of that!” the dark haired one explained.

Obi-Wan searched his memory banks for Anakin having a liking for any particular fruit. Let alone one he’d never heard of that he assumed was unique to Naboo. Perhaps that was for

Senator Amidala? He didn't think it would be wise to point *that* out to the young pair however. The fact that he knew Anakin seemed to be helping his questioning of the infatuated young women.

"What else does he buy?"

"Fruit. Vegetables. Milk. Just food and basic supplies really."

He bowed to them and offered a polite "thank you ladies. You've been most helpful."

Then he left. Thankful that Jedi Padawans were silent in respect when in his presence because he didn't think he could stand much more of that.

The problem was, being obsessed with Anakin meant they remembered him. He got around the whole east and northern side of the square without anyone else being able to recall seeing him.

Trying not to be disheartened Obi-Wan entered the next shop with little hope. He shouldn't have been focusing on his own feelings so much and instead been listening to the force.

He greeted an older gentleman who was sitting at a desk with a polite "good afternoon."

The man immediately looked up and moved to greet him.

"What can I do for you?" he asked kindly.

"I'm looking for a friend of mine and was wondering if you'd seen him. Tall, sandy hair, blue eyes, quite well-built?"

The man stood still for a moment then shook his head.

"Can't say that I have but my sons may have. When would he have come through?"

"I regret to say I'm not quite sure. Within the last month?"

"Ahhh," the man nodded then called "Manad!" loudly towards the back of the shop.

"My younger son has just left on his honeymoon and won't be back for some time but my eldest may be able to help you," he explained

At that moment a man about Anakin's age emerged from the back of the shop in a paint-covered apron.

"What can I do for you?" he asked cheerfully.

"This man is looking for a friend of his. I was busy so I'll leave you to it."

The father nodded his goodbye and returned to his desk.

The younger man offered his hand in greeting and Obi-Wan politely took it for a handshake.

"So, what does your friend look like and when would I have seen him?"

You wouldn't have seen him Obi-Wan's mind sighed to itself. It seemed Anakin's only use for this place was as a food supply stockist. He was doing well at keeping a low profile. On some level Obi-Wan guessed he should be proud. He'd taught him that.

“He’d have been through in the past month. Tall, blondish hair, probably dressed for the most part in black and brown —”

Again he was promisingly interrupted.

“Ahh yeah I know the guy you’re talking about. Real eager, black glove on only one hand?”

Obi-Wan startled. Most people didn’t notice that.

“Yes, he has a mechanical right arm,” he remembered confusedly.

The informant just nodded.

“Yeah, thought it must be something like that.”

“So he’s been here,” Obi-Wan noted with some interest.

Of all the shops he expected Anakin to have been in, this was probably last. Right after that store full of small pets. And the one with baby clothes.

“Yup. I didn’t talk to him much, he came in last week to pick up an order we’d been putting together for him.”

Now that was hard to believe. Very hard. Exactly what was Anakin doing?

“Could you tell me what he ordered?”

The man nodded and headed over to his father’s desk. He tugged at a datapad and shoved in a small chip, typing and pushing things for a few moments.

“Here it is,” he finally said.

Obi-Wan waited, trying to keep himself from getting too elated. It was hard though. One half-lead and two solid ones in such a small town would have seemed unfathomable two days ago.

“Ummm, he ordered a few weeks ago and came back to pick up a few buckets of a specially created blue, and some brushes.”

The man shrugged and handed over the datapad for Obi-Wan to take a look.

“That’s it I’m afraid.”

Obi-Wan searched the little screen, which only reiterated what the man had said.

“No, that’s most helpful. Thank you.”

It was the last store where there was any sign of the missing Jedi. Which left Obi-Wan with Anakin acquiring two droids, food, and paint and disappearing again.

Perhaps after all this time, and all the pressure he’d always been under, the young man had finally gone mad. Either that or he was secreted away somewhere nearby and redecorating.

Obi-Wan allowed himself a splutter of amusement at the ridiculous image that thought brought with it.

Obi-Wan settled himself at the water's edge. As he closed his eyes to meditate he focused on the picture he'd seen this morning on his map. Of the small inlet he now sat in front. He imagined himself reaching out as he knew it did, providing access to an immense series of lakes and waterfalls that covered a vast deal of this small continent. He tried to imagine himself skimming over the water's surface, searching for the familiar signature that would indicate Anakin's presence. Like the houses that dotted the shores he stretched out around him, feeling for the lingering aftermath of Anakin having been here only a week before.

Anakin had definitely visited here, but his presence was impossible to identify.

The question was why. And more importantly, if he'd been back more than once, did that mean he was still nearby?

Hmmmmmm.

Quietly Padmé swallowed the sleepy taste from her mouth. Lunch? Already? How was it possible to go through a morning routine and fall asleep again before lunch was ready?

She quietly pulled away from Anakin and gave him a reassuring smile. There were things to do, she couldn't sleep her day away.

He gazed down at her lovingly, warming her heart. He seemed to understand, just like he always did.

"Lunch?" he prodded again.

His tone was subtle, light. It didn't push for her attention, or demand anything from her, it offered.

Like he is beginning to, she suddenly thought.

Nodding she turned towards the door and allowed him to follow her from the room. As she made her way down to the kitchen she kept sneaking glances back at him.

He was changing. It was very subtle, and had they been caught up in the war and snatching brief moment together, on Coruscant or anywhere else for that matter, she wouldn't have noticed it.

Having him by her side day after day, where their physical environment changed very little, she saw the shift in him. He had stopped demanding things from her. He'd always wanted something. Oh sure, she had been desperate to give it, but he'd always had cravings. Her love, her attention, her time, her soul.

For once, he had only offered.

When they made it to the kitchen he quickly withdrew his meal with a shy smile.

"You made this," she acknowledged, suddenly understanding.

"Yes."

He glanced outside, then settled the piping hot servings to the counter.

“You didn’t have to,” she smiled to his turned back.

With a raised eyebrow she watched him pack it all up into their picnic basket.

“Let’s go eat by the lake. It’s a beautiful day,” he grinned up at her.

“Alright.”

She took his eagerly proffered hand and led him down to the shore, settling on the smalls stretch of sand. It was too cold to go into the water now, but she took his hand and tried to be as graceful as possible as she settled on the blanket.

“I’m so hungry,” she confided.

She leaned towards the basket, its delicious smells drifting out to tantalise her.

A hard, sudden kick from inside caused her face to wince briefly. Too hungry, though, she let it pass. The little one was just moving around, she didn’t have to acknowledge it every time it shifted.

“What is it?” Anakin asked out of nowhere, watching her with a funny little half-smile on his face.

“She moved,” he decided, answering his own question.

In surprise Padmé quickly spooned out a helping of his scrumptious smelling lunch and settled back down with her plate. Now just how did he know that?

“Yes, he moved,” she acknowledged him with a grin.

But no more than a grin, she was starved. She quickly lifted the lunch to her mouth, savouring it with closed eyes as the perfect combination of sensations filled her.

“This tastes wonderful,” she appreciated.

Her eyes opened back up and her gaze found him. Only to see his eyes focused intently on the sand, an intense look of concentration on his face. Like he was trying to make some big decision.

“Tell me,” she coaxed immediately.

He turned to her with quiet indecision. Swallowing another mouthful she waited for him. It was up to him to come to her with his problems, and she would never refuse to help him. He had to know that.

Before she could fully comprehend or prepare herself her was suddenly lurching forward across the blanket.

“Anakin, what —”

Two big hands desperately encompassed her covered middle.

She laughed out loud. This was his big problem? Deciding to touch her?

“Oh. Try here,” she told him with a loving caress.

Knowingly she took his hands as he massaged them lovingly over her. Following her guidance he soon hovered over the last movement. The way he tenderly rubbed soothed her down to her very soul.

And then she had to giggle when his face lit up. She shouldn't have done it, but she couldn't stop herself. Once she'd giggled, he was gone. His laughter burst out of him in a way she'd never heard before. Long, breath-stealing peals of happy laughter.

Their hands danced over her middle as they enjoyed what they'd created.

Padmé had to wonder if they'd ever been so carefree, and already knew the answer. Previously, no they hadn't. Only now, as Anakin began to settle, could they be.

It was like he was... free.

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

Quietly Anakin curled up behind Padmé. He slipped a hand over her waist, luxuriating in the feel of her soft tunic beneath his fingertips. Everything she wore now was warm to keep out the cool air, no barely-there fabrics or partially-nude body. If anything, it made him want her more.

Before he could stop himself he'd slipped his metallic fingers beneath her head until it rested on his shoulder; and slipped his leg between hers so he could pull her tight to him.

Breathing deeply he acknowledged that this was what life was about. Being so close to Padmé he could feel her everywhere. No threat of having to leave, only promise and hope for all things wonderful on the horizon.

How was it that I can spend all morning meditating, and you have fallen asleep, again? he smiled to himself. *I wouldn't have even known you weren't working if I hadn't come up here to talk to you.*

"Anakin?" she asked sleepily.

She turned, watching him, intently serious.

Anakin knew Padmé would wait for him to tell her the problem. What was on his mind wasn't so much a problem today.

"Have you thought of a name?" he asked, looking into her eyes and feeling so happy.

"For the baby?" she yawned.

Nodding emphatically he waited for her to wake up properly. Finally her eyes were properly focused on his and he felt fulfilled. The warmth in her gaze loved him, caressed him. She chased away the doubts of himself that grew while he was concealed here from his other responsibilities.

But the baby was his responsibility too.

"Do you have any names?" she asked with a contented sigh.

Reaching across he traced a soft length of curls that fell over the side of her face.

"I never thought that I would have children, so I never tried to think of any names."

Padmé stared at him searchingly, lying quietly as he touched her.

"You obsessed over me yet you never thought what would happen once you had me?"

He paused, shocked at his own lack of foresight. That was true. He had spent most of relaxation time during his Jedi training fantasising of the life to come once he could confess to Padmé how much she consumed him. But not once had his musings gotten this far into

their future. A handful of times he'd been lucky enough to dream of they were making love. Not once had it been about the baby that might lead to.

"No. All I knew was that one day we would be together and maybe we'd be married. I just wanted to be with you."

Her hands came up to cup his face tenderly, giving him a chaste, lingering kiss. Her lips grazing over his filled him peacefully. In the silence his palm traced down to rest on her hip. He massaged timidly, basking in the glow of their love. And of the little life it had created.

"You are so sweet," she whispered to him when she eventually pulled back.

He shot her a quick smile, not even opening his eyes. He was using the force to surround himself with all the little crackles of light, the sparkles that they created. She made the air around them dance and sizzle with life.

"Tell me," he reiterated. "Tell me baby names you like."

"Don't you want to have any input?" her voice almost laughed into his ear.

He opened his eyes back up and he smirked at her. His focus drifted back and forth from her soft mouth to her dancing eyes as he watched her from his pillow.

"You've had a lifetime to think of good names. I trust you."

He smiled to encourage her, wondering why she was suddenly so shy. He had no doubt the names she'd thought up for their baby would be perfect. Besides, he'd only known of the baby for what, two months? He'd been trying to sort out his own problems, and hadn't really been thinking about names.

Padmé had been pregnant for almost seven months, if anyone could put the time and effort into finding the perfect name, it was her.

"I like Luke, if it's a boy," she admitted softly.

"And if it's a girl?"

She paused to eye him warily.

"You like Luke?"

Her hand came up and she ran a single knuckle over his cheek.

"Be serious," she must really be frightened he would reject her names.

"I like Luke," he affirmed.

She still didn't seem to trust him. Playfully he led her "but I want to know her name if she's a little girl."

"Leia," Padmé determined immediately.

"You like L," he admitted softly. "Because it's the only consonant our last names have in common?"

She looked at him very strangely all of a sudden and he had to wonder if maybe he shouldn't have made that comment.

“You do say odd things,” she cocked her head at him.

“I sit alone in hyperspace a lot,” he tried to shrug it off. “My mind wanders.”

She obviously wasn’t going to let it go so easy.

“To what letters our names have in common? It must wander a great deal.”

“Its long hours and I miss you,” he tried to defend himself against her gentle teasing.

“Yet you’ve never thought of baby names.”

She spent a brief moment caressing his cheek again with a half-smile.

“I just like Luke and Leia,” Padmé finally grinned to relax him once more.

That was, until the next sentence fell out of her mouth.

“Leia or Luke Amidala.”

Anakin froze beside her, his whole body going rigid. She didn’t honestly mean to name them, to not, they couldn’t, the baby would have his name, surely? The one thing that would have been his to give in such a long long time, it had to have his name. He was the father, it was his right. He was sure that Nubians weren’t matrilineal.

A disappointed frown spread over his face as he suddenly got an image in his head of Padmé’s nieces. Their last name was that of their mother. But no, his baby had to have his name. It just had to! He was the last Skywalker. He couldn’t dishonour his mother like that.

Besides. He may have never imagined having a baby, or thought of first names, but he’d always taken it for granted that any child he fathered would have his name.

“Amidala?” he questioned softly.

His eyes bored into hers questioningly. This wasn’t a topic he was going to drop as easily as he did some others.

It occurred to him that perhaps she was doing this to protect him in some way. Surely she couldn’t think that he would be returning to the Jedi after all this time away. He had made his choice. It had been her.

As he feared, she confirmed his suspicions.

“People would know you’re the father if we didn’t,” came her quiet explanation.

“People will know I’m the father,” he told her firmly.

He didn’t see any need for debate over this. He or she would be named after him, and that was that. Apparently she didn’t see eye to eye with him on this though. And unfortunately, she knew exactly how to work around his defences. By bringing up a much more serious point than the name they chose for their baby.

“The war isn’t easing. It’s intensifying,” she told him with a sad murmur.

He closed his eyes and swallowed. He knew that. She left the datareaders lying around often enough. But he knew where he belonged.

"I will not go back."

"You might have to."

"The war might never end."

She looked at him sadly as the truth of why he was here came out once and for all.

"I won't surrender my entire life to it. We can't simply wait for it to finish so we can be together, it could never happen."

"Don't say that," she chastised, sitting up. "It won't be our entire lives."

"It has been our entire marriage. What's to stop it going on forever?"

"Forever is a very long time away and I'm sure it will be brought to a close quickly. You've finished Dooku, the end can't be more than a year away. At some point the Jedi are going to need your help, you're one of their best warriors."

He rolled out of bed and onto the floor, looking down at her warningly.

"Dooku has been gone two months ago and not much has changed."

"You're young Ani."

"Our baby is coming now. Padmé listen to me," he took a deep breath and told her the truth.

"All I want is you. To be with you when this happens and to make you happy. Please, let me," he despaired.

Her gaze didn't leave his but she looked saddened, as if she understood some great truth that he did not.

"I fear millions will suffer, die because we saw fit to abandon our duty for our own selfish reasons. If we had stayed, maybe the war would be finished by now."

"Maybe it wouldn't," Anakin shot back.

"Do you truly believe that Anakin? I don't. You and Obi-Wan were so close, Grievous was on the run from Coruscant. You could have been only days away from capturing him. And since I've left there seems to be no one opposing the restructuring of the senate, more and more of its functions are being redirected to Palpatine's direct control."

Padmé sat on their bed, waiting for Anakin to respond, though he looked so vulnerable. For once he didn't know what to say. She always believed that the two of them played such an integral part in the galaxy. For most of his life he would have been eager to hear that. But now all he wanted to believe was that they were two normal people who had nothing special in their lives apart from the fact that they were in love. No politics, no Jedi. Just each other to care for.

He continued to glare at her for reminding him of the other burdens they'd left behind. It ruined the lovely fantasy he was living out. Annoyed, he scrunched his eyes closed tight for a brief moment.

"What are we arguing about?"

"The fact that we should go back and not hide from the duties we were entrusted with," Padmé's terse voice cut him.

"We were talking about baby names," he reminded her quietly as he opened his eyes back up.

His gaze had softened considerably, and was now almost sad.

"Oh."

That was it. No other comment. Which meant she had no intention of giving up this debate. He bit his lip, ducking his head away from her intense gaze.

"I actually came in here to see if you felt like going into town," he finally mumbled, avoiding her eyes and looking out beyond her shoulder to the lake. "I thought we could pick up some supplies, have lunch, see if the bassinet has arrived."

A smile caught at the edges of his mouth as he felt her surprise through the force.

She got out of bed and came around to him, tentatively putting her arms around to rest on his back.

She didn't apologise, and he didn't expect her to.

Just like he wasn't going to admit that they should go back, she wasn't going to admit that they should stay. But they would never allow a gap to linger between them for long.

"I would like that Anakin," she reached out to him, her touch thrilling him as it always did.

Leaning down he pressed his forehead to hers.

"I only want us to be happy," he whispered.

His lips descended a little further and he couldn't help but sigh as they met in a tentative kiss. She didn't hesitate beneath him and he almost sighed at the relief. *Padmé* his mind murmured as she moved into him. Deliberately his hands came up to settle on her small waist, caressing her slightly with his thumbs.

When they finally pulled apart it was with reluctance. They stood for a moment in perfect silence, foreheads leaning against each other once more.

"Let me brush my hair and see if I can't make myself look different. I'll need a minute to find something plain to wear, then we can go."

Nodding he obediently released her, sitting on the edge of the bed to wait.

He's got to be close-at-hand was the last thought Obi-Wan had before he let himself slowly sink out of his meditation and become more aware of his surroundings.

He sat for some time on the floor of his room, contemplating. He hadn't found Anakin so far, just sitting, waiting in this town.

Common sense told him that if Anakin wasn't coming to him, then perhaps he should go to Anakin.

Curious. Yes, that did seem rather obvious. Since Anakin hadn't returned to town for supplies, maybe he'd be better off finding out where all the nearby homes were, jumping in a boat and letting the force guide him.

"R4?"

The droid powered up and beeped to indicate it was waiting to be given a task.

"Find out how many dwellings there are that aren't part of the town in a, say, four hundred kilometre radius," he requested.

R4 wheeled over to the data port and plugged in, spinning the outlet as it worked.

Obi-Wan sat back against the edge of his bed to wait. His upbringing had rendered him a patient man, and this mission was certainly testing that patience. Still, he could wait a few more moments for the droid to deduce a result for him.

'53' flashed up on the small screen.

"That's not too many."

Getting to his feet he stood up so he could look down on the map R4 projected for him, little dots scattered over the vastly variable terrain.

"Some of these are very remote," he noted, circling the map with an appraising eye.

"It's possible he's not even in a registered structure. I wouldn't put it past him to drag the poor Senator into the wilderness and force her to camp for weeks. Still, some of these would make excellent hiding places. Do any of them have landing pads?"

If any did, that would seriously narrow the selection. It would also explain why there had been no trace of the pair of them in the registered docking facilities.

'This area of Naboo has restricted airspace. No landing pads catalogued' he read.

Obi-Wan nodded. As he started pulling on his clothes he had a brainwave and asked again

"How many would be owned by Nubian elite? Or are even in public hands? Or have been in the past, say, five years."

He pulled his cloak around his shoulders and tugged his boots over his feet.

'49'.

"That doesn't narrow it down enough. We will have to let the force guide us in this matter I believe. Come."

He led the way out of their rented accommodation and down to the riverside. He glanced at the four long finger wharves, counting seventeen small craft and two larger, fishing vessels moored along the sides. All were brightly coloured and beautiful. No object on this planet seemed to sacrifice its beauty simply because it was utilitarian.

Having noted his surroundings, as an almost automatic part of his training, he walked into the harbourmaster's office to see about renting a boat.

Padmé lay back comfortably in the boat, sunning herself in the warmth of the morning rays.

Her eyes settled on the only constant thing in her vision, her delectable lover steering the quiet motor. She let herself indulge in drinking in his form. The taut muscles that she knew still made up his chest. The broad shoulders that encompassed her in warm hugs. The handsome features of his familiar face. The last scar he'd acquired, cutting harshly over his eye. The wind whipping at his lengthening hair.

"Padmé," his hoarse voice interrupted her.

She didn't look up though, letting her gaze undress him mentally as she drifted back down his figure.

"Anakin," she replied coolly.

His long, capable fingers wrapped around the motor controls tightly and she suppressed a small shiver.

"Stop that," his voice cracked and she smirked.

She tilted her head up to study his eyes. Which were firmly fixed in the distance beyond her, pretending to be intent on their destination.

"Stop what?" was her innocent inquiry.

"Even if I couldn't see what you're doing it's coming at me through the force and —" he drew in a sharp breath. "It's hard to contain myself."

She smiled lusciously at him for a moment then respected his plea and stopped eating him with her hungry gaze.

Soon enough they pulled up to the small wharves and she had other activities to capture her interest.

"Anakin where's —" Padmé stopped herself before she could finish her sentence but he seemed to understand.

Where was his lightsaber?

"I'm leaving it here," he indicated the locked compartment. "We've been here enough I don't expect any trouble."

She raised an eyebrow but didn't say a word. Just stepped out onto the dock and took his proffered hand. Together they strolled past the other small boats and up onto dry land.

The tall man led the aging Jedi master to the back of the building. A decent sized craft was quickly lowered onto the slips and then launched into the waiting water.

"The controls are pretty standard," he started to explain, leading Obi-Wan into the boat and sitting beside the control panel.

Obi-Wan was paying the man all his attention when something caught his eye. A small, brightly coloured gondola. That wasn't there when he arrived. He did a quick count to see if the number of craft bobbing unattended was still seventeen. Eighteen. He counted again to double check. Eighteen. One more had arrived while he was inside.

He turned quickly towards the town, hoping to catch a glimpse of Anakin or the senator who couldn't have gotten far if by some brilliant stroke of luck they'd arrived in that craft. But as he was doing so a very young girl walked up the long jetty, pausing over the small boat and leaning down into it.

Accepting that he was getting so eager to find Anakin he was jumping to conclusions, he turned his full attention back to the boat keeper. What he didn't see was the young girl dipping not to the boat, but the pylon it was tied to, and removing the small edible shellfish that grew up the aging wood.

Soon the quick lesson was complete and he was left to his own devices. Obi-Wan powered on the engine and took off, following the path R4 relayed to him via a small datapad.

But before he'd even moved out of the little waterway that led to the town he could feel the force. As he hadn't in days. Tugging him up one small river and into a large, open lake. After a time he began to make out a small house on the other side. Then it became a larger house. Then it became something bordering on a small palace.

He edged the boat to point directly towards it and throttled the engine. As soon as he pulled up to its small dock he just felt — right. He stretched out with his feelings and finally found what he'd sought. Anakin's presence. Against this mooring post, across these stairs. It could hardly be termed lingering it was so strong. Obi-Wan restrained himself, moving up to the lodge's majestic balcony at a respectful pace. But as he embarked on the house itself the truth came to him.

Anakin wasn't here. He had been so very recently — probably within the past few hours. But he wasn't here now.

Standing at the closed doors Obi-Wan eyed the stone floors of the aged building. It was incredibly majestic, no doubt owned by the Senator in some way. It hadn't come up as her property when he'd done a search, but the probability was that the ownership was kept privately listed to protect such a public figure. Something he'd not factored into his request.

He hung his head, demoralised at having come so agonisingly close. Sadly, he reached out more thoroughly, searching for any other life but himself. He found nothing. No Anakin, no Senator. The fact that he had been here, at this remote but lavish retreat, confirmed in Obi-Wan's mind that they were in fact together. On an after-thought he had the inspiration to feel for remaining traces of her too. There they were. Surprisingly strong in a way they hadn't been before.

Prowling around the exterior of the building he found it to be as substantial as it looked from the lake. It was also as drenched in their presences just as it was out on the balcony. Here he'd stood at this outside faucet, there she'd brushed against that tree.

He circled the house once and was for some reason drawn to look upwards. A balcony linked two doorways, and without a thought he braced his legs and leapt. His agility betrayed a much younger man. The landing was perfect, his knees bending to absorb the impact.

They'd stood here. Together. Recently, and often. He could feel it when he closed his eyes and reached out. The senator had been pressed up against the railing, and Anakin leaning against that wall over there. Taking his time, he studied the rooms that weren't trying to hide behind majestic glass-covered openings. One was a large bedroom, clean and made-up. The other was an office, datachips lying haphazardly over the desk and a screen left on with holo updates running across it.

It was the middle of the day. They were most likely out, he couldn't guess doing what.

Settled with the resolution that they would be back soon, Obi-Wan perched himself on the sun-drenched balcony. This would give him time to prepare what to say. If only he knew why Anakin had left in the first place.

Anakin had absolutely no idea the Jedi Master was so close by. If he had, then perhaps his movements would have been more cautious.

For the moment he was leaning against the doorway in the baby shop. Watching Padmé would not appear to be something that was so enthralling. But to him it was. She quietly fussed, picking up things and deciding they were unsuitable. Letting her attention be captured by tiny hats. He even got to chuckle quietly into his hand when she clapped at a set of animals on strings turning to a sleepy tune.

It took her a long time to decide on what she was buying, but he didn't mind. They were nearing the end of this trip and it would probably be her last before the baby was born. Their offspring was growing too big for her to be on and off the jetty with ease.

"Anakin I can't decide," she finally called him in for his opinion.

He stood up and walked to where she and the shopkeeper were deliberating over three suits and a handful more of blankets. Hadn't they already bought blankets? And, for that matter, outfits for the baby as well? Exactly how many did it need?

He must have been making a face because Padmé suddenly laughed at him.

"You are so cute," she whispered softly, kissing his cheek.

"We'll take them all," she announced to the assistant.

This store must be living off of her business, he decided then and there. Then again, it made her tremendously happy. She didn't particularly show it, especially here where other people were watching them, but he knew she'd show it when they were back home. Like last time when she reviewed her purchases by laying them out over their bedcovers, and he could feel her muted delight humming in his consciousness. For some reason having all these little clothes gathering at home fulfilled her. So he didn't question it.

"We'll check the shipping office and then I'm ready to go home," she told him, taking her bag from the counter and leaving the store with her arm looped in his.

"We could stay for dinner," he offered an alternative.

Cautiously, he moved his arm around her burgeoning hips and pulled her in close.

“The depot will close if we stay that long,” she reminded, letting her gaze drift towards the other shops, and the soon-to-be-opening restaurants.

“We’ll get a droid to deliver it,” was his solution. ‘Or we could stay in town overnight, at that little hotel,’ he pointed. “It could be very romantic.”

Padmé chuckled softly, turning to pull him into a small alley away from the public street.

“All we do are things that are romantic,” she reminded him.

She pushed him against the wall, covering him silently then teasing his lips. The small nibbles of kisses convinced him — they’d stay here.

“I know. I like us being alone,” he grinned rakishly.

She yelped as his hand slid up her back, pulling her closer.

“I’d like to see the night displays. We have nothing better to do,” Padmé pondered privately to him.

He accepted the caresses of her lips animatedly. Kisses that continued for a little longer than was necessarily acceptable. A few minutes later they returned to the small forum. Anakin felt dishevelled, quickly straightening his clothes. For some reason Padmé had managed to remain flawless, with only a slight flush in her cheeks.

Afternoon began to give way to evening and Obi-Wan shivered a little, pressing himself against the wall and using it as a wind-break. Time was passing and still they hadn’t returned.

Grimacing he considered the very real possibility that Anakin had felt him coming and they’d left. If they were on the run from him, then they certainly wouldn’t be returning here.

He couldn’t help wallowing in self-pity.

So close!

Turning he leant on the balcony and looked out over the lake. It wasn’t often one was presented with such a perfectly clear sky, free of any space traffic at all. Then an idea clicked in his head.

Fumbling for his comlink he quickly asked

“R4?”

Twittering came back in immediate response.

“When does the next transport leave town?”

He looked down to his datapad for a reply.

‘Sunset’.

He triumphed. R4 had said there was restricted flying space. If Anakin had fled, then the quickest way out of this area was by a public transport, similar to the one he’d caught here himself.

Looking up at the sky, the sun already hanging low, he formulated a plan. He certainly couldn't be in two places at once, but he had R4.

"Go to the station and record all the passengers as they board the public transport. Don't let yourself be seen."

He waited for an affirmative reply then put the little device away.

The sun sank rapidly, and the cold air swiftly became icy. Obi-Wan glanced at the two rooms before him, empty but protected from the cold.

If that was indeed the Senator's bedroom, he had no right going in there. Whatever her reason for allowing Anakin to drag her on this escapade, her privacy did not need to be violated. Especially such an intimate space.

But the other doorway held promise. A study. He would also be able to take a look at those datachips while he waited. Perhaps it would give a clue as to why he, or she, was here.

The cold bit at the tip of his nose to hurry along his decision. He used the force to tempt the doorway open and slid inside. Relief flowed through him as he felt the door shut behind him, the temperature in here significantly warmer. He removed his cloak and sank into the chair behind the desk.

He picked up a loose datareader and pushed in a loose chip from a whole pile of them.

Time to see what the Senator was up to.

Emerging from a warm bath they wrapped each other in long, fluffy, pure-white robes, giggling quietly between them.

Padmé led her tall partner out to the warming fire of the small hotel room, settling on the broad couch. Almost immediately Anakin leaned back against the armrest, propping his feet up on the seat.

"Come here," he begged, indicating for her to come into his arms.

She settled herself between his legs quite happily, resting her back against his chest and allowing his arms to encompass her.

The warmth of the fire had her dozing in and out. Every now and then she'd feel the tickle of a kiss, in her hair or on her neck. For the most part she was content to relax in his arms and try not to think about Jar jar's shortcomings back on Coruscant.

"This is what I imagined when I used to think of us being married," he murmured.

Anakin's lips happily nibbled her ear.

"I don't think hiding from everyone we love because of an unknown 'feeling' you have about Coruscant is what I imagined," Padmé replied distractedly.

Anakin's teeth paused as they were teasing her earlobe, and the accusation laced in her words suddenly came to her.

“Anakin, I didn’t mean it like that,” she sighed, feeling so defeated.

She reached her hand up behind her and caressed his head.

“I trust your instincts,” she reassured.

Behind her Anakin continued to remain silent. In hope of placating him she lifted his hand to her mouth and placed a tender kiss on the back of it.

He remained frozen still.

Turning his hand she placed a very gentle kiss on his palm. That did the trick.

Anakin drifted down to her neck and brushed his lips over her exposed skin. Obviously he’d been placated.

“I never wanted to spend long months away at war. I imagined us being together most of the time, and not hiding our relationship but not really caring what other people think. Like this.”

A small smile graced Padmé’s features and she turned her head for a kiss. He wouldn’t oblige though, pecking the corner of her mouth but nothing more.

“Kiss me,” she tempted him.

Her eyes slid closed as Anakin mumbled “not yet.” His hand swept her hair back off her shoulder and his lips attached themselves to the other side of her neck.

“Please,” she whispered.

She squeezed his hand tight, feeling the brush of small, prickly hairs on his chin as he scratched across her face. It was tantalisingly brief.

“Be patient,” he chastised.

Closing her eyes to his teasing she shuddered as his hands came up to hold her shoulders in loving caresses.

“Let me taste you,” he continued, laving her skin over with his tongue.

“And kiss you,” he pressed firm lips to her chin.

“And please you,” came his final whisper as their lips joined firmly and he climbed out from behind her.

Small shivers shot through her body as Anakin paid all his attention to her and only her. Lovingly she reached her hands up to curl around his defined jaw.

“Padmé,” his whisper was almost inaudible.

His lips weren’t insatiable, but they weren’t chaste either. Padmé could tell how much he relished being with her. For just a moment he pulled his lips away and put them next to her ear.

“I love being your husband,” he whispered.

Their eyes locked as he lay back, possessively drawing her down on top of him.

There was no reply she needed to give. They stared at one another, faces solemn in understanding as their lips were drawn back together.

“One day you will have to be more than that,” she reminded him.

Beneath Padmé he frowned considerably. She knew by now that he didn’t like being reminded of the duty he had abandoned. The time they could remain here was growing agonisingly brief though. She studied his face for further anger. His displeasure lingered a moment then disappeared.

“Not tonight,” he concluded.

Waiting to scrutinise him a moment longer, she determined he’d let it go. Lowering herself she kissed him once more. Her hands crept amongst the folds of his robe and opened them unashamedly.

Anakin slipped his hands down, untying the cord for her and freeing himself to her touch.

“Tonight I am just yours,” he said decisively, revealing his body to her and securing her gaze in his own.

Intrigued, Obi-Wan shot once last glance over the desktop, then the floor, to make sure he’d missed none of the little datachips he’d been studying. Everything he’d read so far was in the public domain. Information on the functioning of the Senate, bills being passed and ratified, budgeting committee decisions. But he did notice there was a slant more particularly towards Palpatine’s movements. From the data she had lying around, Obi-Wan had started looking upon the leader in a whole new light.

The Chancellor seemed to have an awful lot of direct power over the Republic. Ruling powers, that didn’t involve the Senate. Was it possible the Senator in some way felt threatened? Vowing to ponder over that some more, he rearranged the chips how she’d left them and returned the reader to its stand.

They weren’t coming back here. They’d either boarded the transport last night, or were in town and would board another one in the near future.

He exited the room, closing the door behind him and leaping back off the balcony. There was no need to explore the rest of the house. Senator Amidala was still a friend, and he saw no reason to be snooping around her home. Even if she was hiding Anakin.

Without turning back, he looked up to the hill behind him. The sun was still hidden behind it, but only just. The morning was already begun and he wanted to get back and see what his R4 had recorded.

With a light step of promise he hurried for his craft. All he had to do was head back to town and stake out the transport. If he hadn’t already left, Anakin would have to show up to catch it, and he would be there waiting.

Boarding the small boat he brought the engine to life and aimed back for the small town he’d been living in for the past month. Finally all his waiting would come to a head.

Padmé emerged from the small hotel, having settled their bill. Anakin was waiting for her, his hand outstretched to take hers.

Their stroll to the small depot was made in comfortable silence, enjoying the sounds and sights of mixing in a larger society once more. Anakin was quite content to be getting back now. Even more so when he discovered their cradle had indeed arrived. She signed a fake name on the acceptance slip and let him take hold of the decent sized box the droid brought out to him.

“It’s big,” Padmé noted, already grinning in anticipation.

“I know. Come on, I’m ready to be home again.”

She led the way back to the boat, standing patiently on the dock as he adjusted the balance until their package was in place.

They climbed into their small gondola, buzzing out to just beyond the wharves to where one of the big slow trawlers was just leaving. They putted for a few moments, waiting to go around it. Finally Anakin got fed up.

Padmé inadvertently gasped as he gunned the engine and slashed out in front of the mass of a vessel.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, laughing freely as the wind whipped around them.

He just gave her a boyish grin and brought the engine back a notch as they raced away from the village in a wave of white.

Obi-Wan waited patiently for the large fishing boat to move out of the entrance to the docks. As he was finally accorded enough room to slip around the back of the vessel, a roaring engine caught his ear.

He could just see the tail of another boat disappearing over the big boat’s bow. He shrugged it off and moved his own boat into the wharf, mooring it properly. Once the larger boat had moved on he glanced up again, to see nothing more than a small boat with a large package blocking any view of the passenger. It was speeding away, leaving a trail of backwash.

He shook his head at the inadequate programming newer delivery droids were given. Time mattered more than safety now it seemed. He hoped whatever aristocratic landowner was the recipient of that parcel reprimanded the company for being so foolish.

Right now, he had a transport to stake out, and a recording to see.

“Find what you were looking for?”

Obi-Wan looked up to the small restaurateur leaning over his table. The man placed a dish in front of him, and was trying to peer around and watch his datapad.

“Not yet,” the Jedi Master succinctly replied.

He nodded his thanks for the food then watched the man walk away.

Anakin hadn't been on today's transport. But he hadn't returned to that lodge either, so he'd obviously abandoned the place. The only reason to abandon it was because he suspected someone was coming. And the only way to get away would be to take a public transport. The distance to the nearest spaceport was too far to travel simply by speeder unless you intended to take three days over a long and winding road.

The oddness of this whole incident with the Knight indicated he didn't have a couple of days to waste.

He *must* have been on yesterday's transport, he just had to be. All Obi-Wan had to do was study this recording R4 had taken with a little more effort.

"R4? Unfreeze the recording," he muttered.

It came alive again on the screen, showing a small trickle of passengers. A lot of women that were Senator Amidala's height got on board. He could see most of their faces though, and none were her. The few whose faces were concealed with hoods that kept out the cold didn't hold themselves with the dignity of Naboo's missing representative.

Not one of the men was tall enough to be Anakin.

"Where is he?" Obi-Wan was clearly frustrated.

Shaking his head he propped the screen up in front of him.

"Play it from the beginning," he urged his droid as he started his meal.

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

Anakin wandered the lakeshore aimlessly. Now that the baby's room was a step away from finished he had nothing to do. It had been keeping him entertained, putting all the things together just as Padmé wanted.

At this moment it looked beautiful, almost completed. But with only a few tasks remaining, it left him bored. He'd already spent the last three hours working himself ragged running through the forest, back flipping over even the smallest fallen logs.

His eyes strayed up to the balcony that linked their bedroom and office. Padmé was worrying about decisions being made in her absence again. He could feel it from here.

With thoughts of distracting her he grinned to himself. Taking off suddenly he bolted across the sand and up to the house, springing from the frost-tipped grass right up to their terrace. His boots landed on the stones almost silently.

The best effort he could was put into creeping to her office entrance. Grinning roguishly he leant against the doorframe. Arms came up to fold lazily over his chest.

She was mostly turned away from him, intently reading. Anakin let himself study her creased brow as she frowned more deeply. Her squared shoulders as she unthinkingly maintained her posture. Her confident fingers that flew, making requests for more data. Then there was part of her that was attracting more of his attention as the days passed — her belly.

"Touch it," he requested quietly, his eyes dancing back and forth over the perfect curve.

It was so small — it wasn't possible that there could be a human being in there!

She looked up, startled.

"I didn't know you were there."

"Touch it," he again asked, not moving.

He smiled enough that she was tempted to comply.

"Don't be silly," she muttered, looking him square in the eye.

He was watching Padmé so intently he caught when her shoulders shifted subtly.

"Is something wrong?" he wanted to know immediately.

He lifted himself from the doorjamb and walked inside.

"It's my back, it keeps hurting when I sit for a long time."

Anakin was already strolling around to behind her. As soon as he got there his hands immediately placed themselves on her shoulders. Carefully digging in, moving over the muscles.

“Lower,” she directed thankfully.

Two hands, one flesh, one metal immediately moved halfway down her back.

“Better?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He stayed silent as Padmé’s attention drifted back towards her work. After a few minutes of standing over her his gaze drifted back down to her mid-section again.

“Touch it, please?”

“What for?” she asked, so confused.

She threw her head back and looked up at him.

“I want to see your hands on it,” he confided, pausing in his massage.

Looking at him like he was very strange she nevertheless lifted one of her hands and ran it lovingly over the bulge. Anakin’s heart jumped at the sight. It reminded him that even though she worried about Coruscant, she had put him first. She had put them first. With that in mind he couldn’t help but beam at her. He leant down a bit and let his own hand roam the swelling.

“You’re bored,” Padmé suddenly guessed.

“Never with you,” he pronounced.

His lips came down to kiss her. Tentatively at first. But soon he was furtively exploring her neck with his mouth.

“We just did this,” she reminded him beneath her breath.

He felt no less encouraged. The simplicity of nibbling on her neck filled him with delightful shivers of hunger. Even after almost three months of being affectionate whenever he felt like it, there was still a certain novelty to it. And the feeling of having her right here, to tell her he loved her and show her every moment of the day, had changed him.

He knew it had, he could feel the difference in himself. The stability, the notion of belonging and having his own place in the universe.

On top of that, she still tasted wonderful.

Silently he moved around, kneeling before her. Padmé’s eyes flickered with life as he brushed their lips together. She held him to her, running her hands down the back of his neck.

Anakin groaned quietly, at the passion he could feel swelling within himself. Lovingly he grazed his mouth over her, wishing he could get even closer. The not so subtle encouragement Padmé gave him flooded through the force, assuring him that she hungered for him in return. It sparked his enthusiasm.

“Padmé?”

He feasted on her mouth with a desperation he shouldn’t have felt. They’d been together so long now and yet he couldn’t get enough of her.

For a little while longer his hand remained reverently on her midsection.

“Stand up,” he entreated quietly as his knees began to protest.

He had to be closer. The feeling of her under his hands wasn't enough. He needed her weight, her warmth, surrounding and enveloping him. Anakin climbed to his feet, standing straight.

“You feel so good,” he quietly whispered as she ran her hands down his back, allowing him to partially lift her to her feet.

He quickly spun them around, sinking himself into her chair. Pulling her down to settle in his lap.

“You are bored,” she whispered into his mouth.

Laughing around their caresses he cupped her cheeks in his hands, suckling on her lips and enjoying the taste of her sweet kisses.

“I'm making up for lost time,” he clarified.

Her laughter at his reasoning washed the dullness from his day, replacing it with a bright calmness.

“We've been married for mmmph, four years. There's not been a...single chance for kissing...away the afternoon,” he informed.

Languidly he traced his lips down her neck, along her collarbone then back again. Things he'd always wanted to do but never really had the time to, the freedom. The feeling of her warmth as he pressed his hands up flat against her back was rejuvenating. It coaxed her further into his lap, settling her comforting weight around him.

She seemed to shiver just slightly and he slowed down for a moment. Worrying just the one spot on her shoulder as he smoothed his metallic thumb over the back of her neck.

“I should shut the door,” he conceded, looking towards the open doorway to the terrace.

“It's not the cold.”

He paused, his tongue resting against the softness of her ear. Oh! Embarrassed, he didn't look up to meet her eyes. Padmé wanted him. He considered his options then tasted on a hungry trail back up to her mouth.

His hand thoughtfully slid down over her middle for a brief moment. A small thought crossed his mind that perhaps it wasn't good for the baby to be loving Padmé so frequently. Her fingertips brushed his ears just before sinking into his hair and caressing his lips, and that thought quickly disappeared.

He slipped his arms around her fully once more and grabbed her close. Drinking the taste of her from her lips, and the affectionate love she poured into the force.

“I think we should take a nap,” he told her quietly.

Anakin pulled himself away just long enough to look her in the eye.

She nodded and quickly stood up. Practically jumping, Anakin grabbed her hand and pulled her back towards their bedroom.

“We won’t be able to do this in a little while,” she told him breathlessly.

Not understanding her at all, but then again not really thinking about it, Anakin just mumbled a non-sensical reply and kept up his assault on her bared skin.

Scrolling through the best information she could get from news reports was always disheartening. Things seemed to get graver by the day back on Coruscant.

Today had to be the worst. Just as the nursery was about to be completed, so did a single piece of news wipe out all others, flashing up as she was checking for messages on her datapad.

“I’ve got to go back,” she whispered with a sinking heart.

“Hmm?” Anakin prompted, not having heard her.

She looked up from her spot on the floor to her shirtless Jedi. Happily straining himself to finish positioning a beautiful cradle.

“Palpatine has declared an empire,” she told him with an unusual quiet.

She held out her datapad for him to take. Frowning he reached for it and turned it to read. The latest news bulletin pulsed plainly on the screen.

“That’s not such a bad thing. This will help bring peace,” Anakin shrugged and handed it back.

Her eyes widened at him in disbelief.

“You don’t mean that,” she countered him desperately.

“Yes I do. This war has dragged on for too many years already. If he bypasses the senate things will move along much more quickly. Don’t worry Padmé, the Chancellor is a wise man.”

He returned to his furniture moving as Padmé stared at him from her place on the floor. She had never particularly cared for his political views but this was out and out dictatorship! This would never have happened if she’d been there to object. People trusted her ideology and her manner; she could have shifted public opinion enough to convince them. Nobody needed empire.

“I have to stop it. I have to go back,” she told him firmly.

She reached for the wall and braced herself, finding it incredibly hard to stand. He hurried over once he saw what she was trying to do and helped her in eventually finding her feet.

As soon as she was righted she shrugged him off.

“What can you do?” Anakin asked seriously, reaching for her datapad again and reading more closely. “It has already been enacted and the Chancellor has taken control.”

While his argument had some logic to it, it went against every belief she’d ever held. She couldn’t stand back and do nothing. They should never have deserted the capital at such a

critical time of the war.

“Where are you going?” he wanted to know as she made to leave.

“I need to think,” she muttered.

He started across the room as if to follow her, with an “I’ll come with you.”

Shaking her head Padmé cringed away from his approaching caress.

“No I —”

His face fell dramatically. Though she was sorry to hurt him, she couldn’t be around him right now.

“I just want to be alone.”

It was the nicest way she could put it. Her other option was to sit him down and tell him what she really thought. His simple acceptance of the man she’d considered for some time as a despot disgusted her. Ultimate power for a single person was no way to bring peace. No matter how wise they were.

His hand fell uselessly to his side and he looked absolutely crestfallen as she left him as quickly as she could.

Empire. With that heartless man as Emperor. Where were the defenders of the Republic? Where were the Jedi? Stretched too thin by the war. Fighting in defence of Outer Rim settlements. Protecting the major food producers. Holding back Separatist forces. Secluded in Lake retreats.

She threw a guilty look back down the corridor behind her but kept walking away. Now was not the time to dwell on that.

Her head spun with the destruction of all she had loved. But then again, she couldn’t remember it working properly in her whole time as Senator. Corruption was rife, that was obvious to anyone. The depth of it had been increasing over time and the ineffectiveness of the Senate’s decisions with it. But it was better than Empire.

She thought back to when she’d been a mere child queen. Even then the bureaucracy had been unable to deal with the threat of the full-scale genocide of her people. But only now had it reached a pinnacle.

Walking out into the garden she paused, slowing her steps. She was far enough away from Anakin that she could truly be alone in quiet.

As if it missed him, the baby kicked firmly. She smiled sadly but wouldn’t indulge the little thing and didn’t put her hand down to reassure. What kind of universe were they going to bring this one into? A few days ago even she had felt happy. Free. Fulfilled. The baby was the most precious thing in the world, and she wanted it so much.

But now. She felt as if she’d sacrificed the freedom of so many for one life. And she detested that even as its mother she couldn’t put it first.

Briefly she considered what would have happened if they’d stayed on Coruscant. Her thoughts flickered to Anakin’s insistence that they leave. He had sensed something coming. It

must have been this. It must have. Conceivably they could have been hurt, she guessed. But then again, it didn't seem a particularly violent uprising.

True, news was limited so far, but with the army directly answerable to the Emperor now people seemed to just accept.

Even the Jedi.

That annoyed her. Their loyalty should have been to democracy, not this tyranny that was being imposed. Why, why would they go along with it?

"Sidious. Palpatine is Sidious," came Anakin's angered voice.

He was standing on the small terrace with his hands clenched at his sides.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, snapping without meaning to.

"Don't push me away," he demanded in return.

Raising an eyebrow she folded her arms as best she could and bore her gaze down on him. If he wanted a fight she was ready.

"I was looking around the baby's room and everything I've been considering recently just suddenly made sense."

"Which is?" Padmé pushed impatiently.

Just get to the point she hurried him.

"Palpatine is the Sith Lord the Jedi have been trying to discover for, well at least the whole time I've been there."

"I thought the Sith Lord had control over the Senate."

Anakin nodded.

"For the whole time he's been Chancellor?"

"Probably."

She was starting to see what had taken him months of force-enhanced meditation to.

She stared at the ground for a moment in pure thought. Sith were the sworn enemy of Jedi. The Jedi were protectors of Republic, democracy. If the Chancellor, a Sith, had just done away with the Republic that allowed dispute amongst member states, then no role was left for its peacekeepers.

She took a deep breath in startled realisation.

"He's going to attack the Jedi."

Anakin stared at her like she had just told him she was in labour. Complete surprise and no clue what to do.

Her head shot up and their eyes met.

"He couldn't take on the whole Order even if he wanted to," Anakin tried to assure but she shook her head frantically.

Padmé could remember all the small facts that surprised her when the temple's spending had come under review six months ago. For once she was thankful she'd been forced onto a budgeting committee.

"They're spread thin, the physical temple has halved its running costs in the past two years because the population on Coruscant at any one time has dwindled so drastically."

"Even so he wouldn't dare. One Sith Lord couldn't destroy the whole Order. There's Masters, Knights, Padawans —"

Her own thoughts of a few moments ago came back to her. *He has control of the army.* Millions upon millions of clones. Vastly outnumbering a small race of peacekeepers.

"The clones are loyal to the head of the governing body," she recited the military creation act she'd opposed. "The Chancellor."

"If enough clones attacked even I couldn't hold them off for long," he admitted quietly.

Quietly Padmé assessed the mounds of information she'd been reading for months now. If he attacked the Jedi he could very well wipe them out. And he wouldn't be punished.

For a horrible moment her heart constricted and she pressed a hand to her mouth. A concerted effort to wipe out the Jedi by another force user... every single one of them would be gone. She forced herself to focus her sight on Anakin and admit what truly worried her. The Jedi could disappear and she would mourn, but the mere thought that Anakin might be among them devastated her. She could very well lose him, especially if the Chancellor came looking.

Calm she told herself.

Anakin was here, alive. Hidden and waiting for his own happiness. Now that they'd possibly understood Palpatine's plans, maybe they had a chance to stop them.

Padmé closed her eyes in resolve. They would stop him.

In front of her Anakin's face changed from disbelief to anger until finally he realised the Chancellor's full betrayal.

"I have to get a message to Obi-Wan," he firmly decided.

And she agreed. It meant sacrificing their little sanctuary. Their relationship could be found out. Where they were hiding could be discovered. They certainly wouldn't be having their baby the way they'd been looking forward to.

But it would save the Jedi order. It would save the Republic. And that was a risk she had to take.

Dangling his bare feet in the ice-cold water was the most useless thing he'd ever done. It was also the most refreshing.

With his gaze focused on the fresh blue sky above them Obi-Wan felt peaceful.

Until his com started bleeping in his pocket. He eagerly removed it, hoping it was news of some clue Anakin had inadvertently left. The young man must be lurking about town somewhere, he'd felt him nearby on a number of occasions, but knew that Anakin must by now be deliberately hiding from him. The knight obviously couldn't escape as planned, because Obi-Wan was watching the main exit road, and the passengers who boarded the daily transports.

But the sounds that came out of his com were from his R4, and he still didn't understand enough to communicate more than very simple commands.

"Yes R4? Do you have a message?"

The droid beeped an affirmative and he put the communicator away.

He hurried to pull his feet out and didn't even bother to put his boots back on. It took all his effort to remain calm and walk with the pace that befitted a Jedi master. He still reached his accommodation in record time.

"Play it R4," he quickly demanded.

Oddly enough, the droid was plugged into the room's single terminal. Instead of playing a holo three words flashed up on the screen.

'Palpatine is Sidious.'

In his younger days Obi-Wan would have been startled. After years of war and the loss of many friends, he simply sunk on to his bed.

"Who sent this R4?"

'Sender unknown'.

"Anakin," he deduced immediately. "Now how can he know that? Where is the originating source?"

'Second moon of Bogden'.

He didn't believe that for one moment. There was no way Anakin was on Bogden. He was here. No longer at that lodge, but probably still within a hundred kilometre radius. Only Anakin would determine who the Sith Lord was from such a distance.

"Show me the latest Holo broadcasts of the Chancellor," he asked his droid thoughtfully.

Fingers into the beard. It was habit now. A physical manifestation of deep thought processes.

He raised an eyebrow at footage of the Chancellor declaring himself Emperor.

"I think Anakin might be right. Scramble Code 4 to Coruscant."

Palpatine calmly deactivated his holoreceiver as the illegal link to Obi-Wan Kenobi's transmission for the Jedi Temple ended. They knew of his identity then. That was unfortunate.

Standing from his desk he turned to look out over the sparkling city. The sun had set long ago, and lights now adorned all buildings and vehicles. There was no light in this office though.

It was hard to tell where Kenobi was. The Chancellor had trusted the master to bring Skywalker back to the capital by now. Time was running short. Too short. He watched with muted interest as two speeders collided and plummeted hundreds of stories.

As he watched them wipe out other vehicles in their descent he made his choice. No. He couldn't wait for the boy to return. He would have to push ahead with at least the political side of his plans. There was no option to delay any longer, it was too risky. Especially since the Jedi had now explicitly voiced their concern.

The attack on the Jedi would have to wait. The thrust of the empire had to happen now. Holding the senate in such disarray was too delicate an operation to continue.

But the Jedi, their time would come. When the boy and his raw power were found, all his plans would be complete.

"Padmé?" he murmured into the dark, testing whether she was still awake.

"Yes?" her voice asked clearly.

Good, she couldn't sleep either.

They hadn't been on very good terms when they got into bed tonight. Except now, he needed her. Knowing full well the pain he'd feel if she pushed him away again, he nonetheless moved over to her side of the bed.

He could have cried in relief when she let him enfold her in his arms.

He remained silent for a long time, until she eventually started stroking her nails along his fingers.

"Remember I told you something was going to happen on Coruscant?" he asked tentatively.

"Yes."

"I know you don't like what's happened but I think it could have been worse than this."

He felt her shiver and knew it wasn't from the cold. He snuggled up closer to her back and pulled the blankets a little tighter anyway.

"Violent?" she questioned.

Grimacing he nodded, knowing she could feel it against her back.

She suddenly lunged out of his arms and hit a button next to her.

The lights came up and she rounded on him.

"Will it get violent now?"

He looked at her longingly. The long hair that fell down around her shoulders in bouncing curls. The series of curves that now made up her body. And the intense concern for hearing only one answer from him that formed deep valleys on her face. He shook his head to answer her question, but that wasn't what he was worried about.

She looked relieved but eyed him cautiously.

"What is it?" she murmured a little more softly.

Grateful for her palm coming down to cup his cheek he nuzzled into it softly.

"That warning I felt. Could it have been about me?"

She didn't look excessively surprised. Instead she just burrowed back down into his welcoming arms. He felt safer there, with her around him. Enough to confront his past and what may have been the greatest failure of his short life.

"He's always been my friend," Anakin said softly.

She stared into his eyes, waiting for him to continue. Suddenly he couldn't get the words out. The one person he'd truly trusted to guide him was a fraud. He was convinced of that now. The fact remained, however, that Anakin had always looked up to Palpatine in a way he didn't with anyone else. Obi-Wan had never completely understood him, certainly he had not been one to encourage ambition. His master was a much better friend. And while Obi-Wan had been his guide in Jedi matters, he had always trusted Padmé to look after his heart and be his rationale.

He'd always known he was too close to her to fully trust her in that role though.

That was why the Chancellor had been the perfect mix of the two. He had been there for Anakin any and every time, encouraging, praising.

If he was so self-centred as to make himself a Sith, did that mean his guidance of Anakin had also been self-centred?

"You weren't under his direction, you didn't carry out any missions for him. You're not responsible," came her quiet reassurance.

He watched her sadly.

"Not yet. If we hadn't left I could have been. Maybe that was why I felt we had to leave so quickly?"

Her fingers reached down and rested calmly on his shoulder.

"What could have been and what is are two very different things," she wisely consoled.

But Anakin charged on relentless, to tell the only person he sincerely trusted of his biggest fear. A dread he'd been carrying around all day.

"He encouraged me to kill Dooku. You don't think he wanted me as his apprentice do you?"

He kissed her softly when she didn't even flinch at the question. Her calm head was what had saved him from revealing their treasured relationship on many occasions, and right now it

was saving his sanity.

Then he put his arms around her and didn't say another word. He already knew the answer to his own question. It wasn't pleasant. And she didn't try to deny the awful truth to him.

Padmé reached up and turned the lights back off.

"But you're not his apprentice, are you?" she reminded him softly. "Right now you're pretending you're not even a Jedi."

He rubbed his cheek at the soft material of her nightgown. That was true.

"You once told me that the Sith crave power for themselves. That they seek strength through force. Whereas Jedi seek only to maintain harmony and peace, dedicating themselves to the good of the many, instead of the good of one."

He lay silent as he listened to her.

"You've always wanted to be a Master, but I think that's more about acceptance by your peers than having something to laud over others. Apart from that you would probably make an excellent Sith Apprentice BUT! —" she cut him off before he could interrupt, "you gave all that up to be here instead. The person you are right now would not do the Chancellor any good," she decided conclusively for him and he smiled.

"Thank you," he whispered softly.

She pressed a kiss to the top of his head and he could feel her relaxing.

While she wasn't announcing that she was about to throw herself into the midst of the collapsing government, the fall of the Republic still dominated her mind.

It dominated his too, but only because he feared she might actually leave. It seemed a long time ago that Sith lords and army battalions had existed. Recently his life had only focused on the best life had to offer and it had changed who he was. Just this morning finding a screw that had gone missing for a mobile of animals to hang in the baby's room had engulfed him.

Death and destruction on the scale of thousands, even millions now seemed as incomprehensible to him as it did to most other people on this planet. Despite the fact that he'd witnessed it first hand.

And he was trying to push away the idea that he may have been groomed as Palpatine's apprentice since day 1. Right now he wanted to continue his blissful ignorance. Because it was just that — blissful.

"I hope everything goes alright," she worried.

Anakin frowned as he sat beside her. His eyes drifted out over the lake as hers did, focusing on nothing in particular. Like his attentions of late. Seeing the bigger picture but not attending to any one individual problem.

He sat in silence, letting her finish her thoughts. Meanwhile he concentrated on trying to read her. Usually she was so hard to accurately pin down. For once it was very easy for him to

sense her, and anxiousness was increasing.

She shifted restlessly beside him, her hands slipping under her belly protectively. It struck him as odd, because it was something she didn't really do.

"I've wanted this for so long that I can't imagine losing it," she mused bluntly.

Without even thinking about it he answered

"You won't lose it."

It was obvious she didn't quite trust his faith, but he knew their baby would be born without too much trouble. He could just feel it.

Then her other words froze him.

"How long is 'so long'?" he wanted to know.

She rubbed his shoulder with a gentle laugh.

"Long enough. It doesn't matter now, he's about to be born."

Narrowing his eyes to focus on the island in the middle he replied

"humour me. You've wanted it since when? Since you found out about this one?"

She pulled her hand away and he could see from the corner of his eye that her attention turned from him to the flowers laid out in the distance. Which made him wonder if she'd wanted a baby for much longer than he'd suspected.

"Before. Probably since I retired as Queen. I told you I wanted a family before we even got married," she remembered indignantly, as if he was challenging her right to want a family of her own.

Anakin didn't say anything. He'd forgotten, she had said something along those lines once. But he didn't really take them to heart. And up until now he'd just taken it as given that their baby was a nice surprise, a slight mistake they made. Immediately he started having thoughts of her planning this.

Or even worse, that she'd been trying to get pregnant all along. That every time they'd touched each other, that was her intent.

Caught up in his thoughts he was forgetting the reality of how the force shattered around them whenever he was with Padmé in that way. He was also blind to her now, already frightened by her own impending motherhood beside him, when he stood up abruptly and started towards the house.

"What is it Ani?" she exclaimed behind him.

Her tone pulled his feet to a stop. But her terror, the feeling from her that there could be something hidden, foreboding in their future came to him like a wave and turned him back towards her.

He didn't have a reply and she smiled sadly at him.

"How long is it going to take for us to be honest with each other?" she questioned him.

“Any man could have given you a baby.”

He didn’t say it but the meaning was implied. She could have chosen someone who wasn’t so off limits. Who didn’t have so many dreams and ambitions to put on the line. The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

And she had the perfect reply.

“No man but you, who owns my heart, would I want to.”

She studied him for a brief moment then the edges of her mouth turned up.

“I didn’t want to start a family until the war was finished and you were home more.”

He watched with fascination as her hands twisted uncomfortably at her sides.

“Every time we make love, it’s because I want you, just you,” she clarified awkwardly for him.

His face slowly broke out into a small grin then a full-blown smile. He retreated to her side and held her firmly.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t want our baby for its own sakes though!” she clarified as he held her to his chest.

“Mmmhmm,” he assured, ducking beneath her neck to kiss at it.

“And I am worried that something will go wrong. I want it so badly,” came her sigh as he cupped her face tightly.

“Anakin,” she murmured as his lips found hers.

Her hands caressed down his hard chest eagerly. Fingers slipped down to undo his belt and start parting all the layers of fabric. Her eyes shivered closed as his lips drifted over her ear.

“Not out here,” she told him softly.

Nodding, he forced himself to pull away. Taking her hand he helped her up and slowly led the way to the stairs.

“Wait,” she stopped him, peering down past the kitchen.

He didn’t say a word as she instead tugged him down into a room he’d never bothered with before. Right opposite the baby’s room.

“This is going to be our room soon. Why don’t we try it out,” she tempted him, almost beneath her breath.

Anakin’s eyes glittered in anticipation as she led him in towards the big empty bed.

Flustered and tired Padmé watched Anakin stretch his hands above his head. With the cool sun outlining his perfect form she rolled onto her side, studying him quietly. He amazed her. After everything they’d just discovered, that his mentor was a monster, that his way of life was threatened, he was still here.

That was what made her think that, as much as he was sacrificing to make her happy, she could never allow him to give it up. She loved him. She wanted him to live the life he dreamed of.

“I’m going to move some of our things down here,” he suddenly announced.

“Hmm?” she queried distractedly.

Her eyes danced over his chest but her heart was quietly aching. This life was perfect. To be hidden from everything and be together, make love whenever they wanted. It also denied them both their dreams. She wanted to be back on Coruscant, speaking out against Palpatine as no one seemed to dare to.

And as much as Anakin would like to think he was nothing more than her lover, he was only living as half a man. Because he was a warrior. A damn good one.

She let her eyes drift up to his as he tugged his pants back on.

“You’re close to —” he gestured to her stomach as if that explained everything.

She looked at the bump in the covers her middle now made.

“I can see it’s getting harder for you to go upstairs. You’re down here right now, it’s a good chance to make this our bedroom,” he decided pragmatically.

“It’s not due for another two weeks,” she told him thoughtfully.

He was right though. It was much harder to get upstairs now than it had been a month ago. Almost impossible really. She’d be glad to never take them again.

He’d finished pulling his clothes back on.

“I think she’s closer than that,” Anakin paused to stare at the wall thoughtfully. “I can feel it.”

With a quick grin before she could say anything he was gone.

Curling up in the warm covers her thoughts drifted to the birth, and beyond. If the baby was indeed that close, then they needed to discuss what was going to happen in their future.

She closed her eyes as a tear slipped out. Empire. Slaughter of the Jedi. Armies of clones and droids uselessly fighting.

Mother, father, and their tiny little baby was a fantasy the universe would not fulfil for them. There was no use pretending anymore. If Palpatine was indeed the Sith Lord, then Anakin had to go back.

“What’s wrong?” his voice startled her.

His arms were full of her favourite blanket and the hair things she kept laid out on her dressing table. With reverence he placed them on a dressing chair but quickly returned to her side.

Before he could cut her off she firmly told him

“We have to go back. You have to return to the Jedi just as I have to return to the Senate.”

Surprisingly he lowered his head, climbed off the bed and muttered “I know,” before disappearing out the door again.

Closing her eyes she watched him leave with a breaking heart. Again. Again they were going to spend their days parted, or knowing that they would be soon. That throbbing cycle of not loneliness but desperation. She could exist on her own quite adequately but she longed for his company. For his love.

He was running away from the issue again when he refused to stay and talk. That didn’t mean the facts disappeared. Their return to Coruscant was imminent.

She took a deep breath and apologised to their unborn child. She wished the life it was about to have on no one, least of all their precious baby. It physically ached in her gut to know that he would be apart from her again. And that her child would mostly know her as the half-person she was when Anakin was gone.

Never mind how they were going to explain this to anyone. Her own absence she could claim was a personal matter and almost get away with it. If she cajoled and sweet-talked her way to enough people they would leave it be.

For Anakin that was the worst explanation he could give.

He startled her when he walked back in, a stack of his neat folded clothes in his arms.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, understanding where he’d gone.

Not running from her again. Just moving their things. Like he’d said.

“They’ll keep me under close watch when I go back. I won’t be able to spend the night,” he told her pragmatically.

Nodding, Padmé watched in awe as he settled his clothes in a dresser then strode out of the room again.

He was just accepting this? How unlike him.

‘Won’t be able to spend the night.’ Sadly she resigned herself to the empty bed once more. Their baby suddenly thrashed around inside her. She rolled her eyes and acknowledged that all the late nights that were coming up would be handled alone.

In he came again, this time with a datapad he placed in her hand and pockets full of datachips.

“Which clothes do you want?” he inquired.

“The ones near the front of my wardrobe,” she quickly answered.

Before he could leave again she cupped his cheek in a silent question.

‘What are we going to do?’

“I’ll say you asked me to accompany you, leaving immediately on a personal matter. Hopefully they’ll accept that and not ask for more details. If they do...”

“You’ll say it’s private and I’ve requested your silence,” she told him determinedly.

He kissed her cheek and smiled a heart-stopping grin.

“Exactly.”

He went from the room and she decided they needed a time limit. She couldn’t move from here now, they’d left it to late. Especially if the baby was going to come sooner. And once it was born she probably wouldn’t be able to travel to well. Nor did she want to subject their little one to hyperspace travel in its first few days of life.

If Palpatine was going to consolidate power they couldn’t hide here much longer though.

“Two weeks here after the baby is born, then we’ll go back. Agreed?” she offered him as he came in holding hangers of dresses.

“No! Not agreed!” he vehemently denied. “I want time with you, I want time with the baby!”

He stormed into the room’s wardrobe, gone from her sight for a few seconds as he hung her things. He would be the one to suffer from their parting more. At least she would have the baby.

“I’m going to miss everything,” he told her quietly when he came back. “Two months, here before we return to Coruscant,” he demanded.

Padmé immediately shook her head. Two months. Far too much could happen on Coruscant in two months.

“Two months after the baby is born is almost two and a half months from now. That’s far too long.”

He squinted one eye, then smirked and disappeared.

“What is it?” she called loudly after him but he didn’t reply.

This time he must have run, because he came in with more of her clothes quite quickly.

“What is it?” she asked again.

“One month then, that’s my final offer,” he changed the subject.

Their gazes locked and it was a battle of wills before she finally relented.

“One month from the day the baby is born. No more.”

Nodding, Anakin bounced up beside her, intriguing her.

“I can’t wait,” he told her enthusiastically. “She’s going to be here soon.”

Padmé smiled indulgently but looked out the window worriedly. One month was an awfully long time in galactic politics.

One month was also far too short a time for a young husband to be with his wife. Anakin clearly meant to savour every minute as he loomed over her, lips descending with a smirk that made his plans for the rest of the afternoon very clear.

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

Uncomfortably wriggling in the bed Padmé found it very hard to get comfortable. The baby wouldn't stop moving and the bulge was making it impossible to lie on her side, or her stomach, or anything but her back. And she was sick of sleeping on her back.

Frustrated and tired tears started to well in her eyes. It *hurt* to sleep like this. She tried rolling onto her side again but her head didn't sit on the pillow right and her legs were threatening to cramp.

"It's alright," Anakin's voice whispered in a sleepy daze.

She was in such pain that it didn't quite register he was awake. His arm silently slipped up beneath her head. Even his soft breath tickling over her ear as he changed position to wrap himself around her couldn't bring all her attention from her aching muscles. At her back he shuffled closer. He pressed up to her nightgown with his bare skin so she could feel all his warmth. In relief she whimpered quietly, his hand travelling down her bare arm before he laced their fingers together.

Then his strong thigh slipped between hers and the position was perfect. It felt so incredible for the aches to pass away into nothingness as he curled into exactly the position she needed.

They didn't share any further words and in the dead of night he passed right back into sleep. In his arms though, Padmé lay awake a little longer. Thankful for whatever instinct had woken and moved him to exactly where she needed him. Just like it had propelled them here from Coruscant a lifetime ago.

Rubbing his fingers gratefully she brought them to her lips for an open-mouthed lingering kiss. When he didn't stir she settled down into the crook of his arm to fall into a comfortable sleep.

Even the baby settled down. With a small smile to herself she wondered at how the little thing always seemed to know when Anakin was nearby. She chided herself at even thinking that his presence alone was what calmed the baby so often. But it did seem to be that his soothing hands or lilting voice often calmed their unborn offspring, even when he wasn't trying to.

Her mind carefully whispered to her that she was ready to have the baby now, because she was beginning to tire of being pregnant.

The next morning Padmé laid down her datapad for the last time. For some reason the Jedi council hadn't moved on Anakin's information, and Palpatine's so-called reforms were reaching a crescendo. There was so much she could be doing back on Coruscant.

Her thoughts drifted to the only good she was doing here. Anakin.

Her lips were quirking into a secretive smile before she could even think about it. Since they'd been married they'd never been as close as they were now. Their hearts twisted together so completely. There'd never been the time to relax with each other. She was positive that giving up his companionship when they returned to Coruscant wasn't going to kill her, but she could already anticipate the emptiness she'd feel without him there.

Of course, that was nothing compared to what he'd already done for her. Anakin had possibly given up everything to be here. She had tried to give up nothing. With a small frown she realised that she'd stayed glued to reports leaving the capital, and her only reward was stress and time she'd forced herself to have away from him.

At that moment she firmly resolved that Anakin had a place in her life too. One thought still haunted her though — Anakin was only close to a handful of people, and one of them was leading the republic and the Jedi order towards execution. Possibly expecting the help of the very husband that had detached himself from his Order.

How much did he tell Palpatine about us, I wonder?

With that she awkwardly stood from the table in the kitchen which would have to be her office until she could move up the stairs easily. Her destination was already chosen.

It was a short but slow walk down the corridor to the baby's room.

The door was already open when she finally made it, and Anakin was leaning over the small bassinet, fiddling.

She didn't say anything but he looked up anyway. Her heart jumped at the sheepish smile that spread across his face.

"It's finished," he told her unnecessarily, settling the little stuffed creature on the baby's pillow.

Padmé nodded silently, feeling a little choked up as she looked around, avoiding his gaze. The comforting colours on the walls, the soft fabrics, the crystal clear windows exposed to the sunshine and crystal lake beyond.

It was perfect. Their baby's room was complete, and all thoughts of politics were gone. Their lives were about to be as whole as this room.

Every single little thing had its place. Anakin had attended to each detail with a finesse she didn't think he possessed.

Her eyes stopped on him — a complete contrast to everything in the room. Tall with broad shoulders where everything else was tiny-sized. Drab, sensible, earthy fabric where every surface was opulently dressed in colours of the sky — purples and blues, pinks and yellows. Unruly hair layered over his head where nothing around him was a centimetre out of place.

And he'd never looked more suited to any other setting than his own baby's room.

Her throat closed and tears started growing over her eyes as she fell in love with how well he suited the little room he'd formed.

"Don't cry," he grinned.

He was in front of her and pulling her into his arms in seconds. They were now both surveying the room, and from his arms she could see he'd even tucked the little sheets into perfect corners.

"You've done everything. Anakin, it's so beautiful," she finally smiled.

"I'm glad you think so. I only follow your instructions."

His hand rubbed her back tenderly and she closed her eyes, trying to block out the thought of the traitorous new emperor and concentrate on Anakin's caresses. His lips even pressed themselves briefly into the top of her head but it wasn't enough.

Now that he'd finished it all seemed so — *real*. It made her excited, ready for the little thing to join them. But her love for their baby had her doing something she'd never truly done before — fearing for their lives.

"Palpatine was your friend, did you tell him about us?" she asked, pulling back from his arms a little.

He stiffened considerably.

"You don't trust me," he seemed to immediately deduce.

For the first time in months Padmé saw an expression that had once graced his features so often. His eyes narrowing. At her.

She was almost startled by the about turn in his manner. His loving gaze disappeared and with it the warmth of his comforting arms. Still, she'd known it was a provocative question, and she intended to know the answer. With or without incurring his wrath. She needed to know if in a worse case scenario Palpatine could use her as leverage over Anakin. How could he think she didn't trust him?

"You know I do," she calmed, running her fingertips over his bare forearm.

She stood silently, waiting for the man of a few minutes ago to reappear, or Anakin to become argumentative. When he was like this, he could frighten most of the universe into backing down. Not her though.

His eyes still stayed narrowed accusingly. She could read everything in that gaze. It seemed to say 'I willingly gave up my future for you'. But she could also read the hurt of a lack of trust beneath it. Tentatively she rested her hands on his shoulders. Choosing the least confrontational way to soothe him. She couldn't remember a time when this fear that he would lose her didn't exist. And the occasions it reared its head were always ugly. There was only one way to assuage that fear — reassure him with touch then slowly placate him with reason.

"If he knows about us he could try to blackmail you," Padmé warned, looking up to him and refusing to let his attention waver as her gaze held strong to his. "If he knows about the baby he'd have all the control he needed."

His eyes still blazed but now they focused on her intently. She had his attention.

"I only tell him about my mistakes and frustrations, or my triumphs."

With a little confusion she tried to interpret him. Was he trying to say that he had told Palpatine about their relationship, that she was a mistake, or worse, a triumph?

With a sigh and an exasperated rolling of his eyes he muttered reluctantly “no. He doesn’t know about us.”

She could almost feel her stomach settle in relief. Anakin seemed to be relaxing against her. His hands reached up and stroked her sides lovingly.

“Our marriage is only about us. I thought I needed him to help me with other things but I don’t — didn’t — need him to help me love you. I can do that all on my own,” he conceded.

As each word passed his tone became less defensive and more tender until her lips were a breath away from his.

“Our lives belong to the galaxy but our love, our baby, they’re just ours,” he told her softly.

And with his words Padmé softly kissed him. He’d finally reassured her that he understood how his life would be lived.

A small pain in her back started to grow. Then spread out.

The caresses of their lips ended as she pulled away from him nervously.

“Ow!” she suddenly exclaimed, stepping back from him and bending over to try and release the pressure.

“What is it?” Anakin demanded, placing his hand on her shoulder and rubbing gently.

She was gulping in air when she heard him come to an understanding she hadn’t yet reached herself.

“It’s the baby.”

There was a long pause then he finished his own sentence with a clam horror she never though she’d hear lacing his tone.

“You’re going into labour.”

Anakin felt completely unprepared as understanding dawned in her eyes.

“Already?” she gasped. “It’s not time. Maybe they’re false contra —” she cut herself off and gasped for air.

Taking her hand in his own he continued to rub her back anxiously. Where was this supposed to happen? Here, on the floor in the baby’s room? That didn’t seem right. Realising he’d be no good to her in a panic he closed his eyes and tried to breathe. He tried to open himself to the force. It took him a mere split second to realise there was no way that was going to happen. He wasn’t nearly calm enough. The event they’d been waiting months for was about to take place, and no mystical energy field was going to help him now.

Padmé seemed to calm a little and slowly straightened herself.

Maybe she was right, maybe it wasn't time. There was a moment of silence as he considered what he'd been feeling building the past few days. He'd been sure the baby was close at hand.

"It's coming," Padmé agreed with him softly.

Nodding, he had nothing that would be quite right to say. Their baby was about to be born, what could possibly be adequate to express just how petrified he truly was?

Padmé was about to be in a *lot* of pain.

He must have seemed so confused, standing there rubbing her shoulder as he watched her face worriedly. Her hand reached for his cheek and stroked it, pulling him close to briefly brush her lips over his.

"Help me into bed, then come back in here and activate the droids," she gave him clear instructions.

"Alright," he agreed, taking her hand in a firm clasp and slipping his hand around her waist.

The urge was there briefly to just swing her up into his arms like he'd done on his first return to Coruscant as her husband. It would be a much faster trip if she didn't have to waddle. This time though she was far too big for even him to carry, so he paced with her very slowly out the doorway and across the cool floor.

"What's going to happen?" he asked nervously when she very slowly lowered herself to the bedside.

Padmé reached for her buttons and he watched on, his hands twitching for want of something to do.

"I thought you were going to read about it?" she asked quietly, her fingers shaking.

She's scared too he quickly understood.

He'd just assumed when the time came she'd be as calm and coolheaded as she always was, and he'd follow her lead. At the moment it looked like they'd both be useless.

"Can you get my nightgown?" she asked without a hint of fear.

But he knew. He could see it.

He handed her the cloth soundlessly, then helped her change. When she was fully dressed her just stood there uselessly.

"Anakin, go turn the droids on," she instructed him again.

Nodding he looked to the door but didn't actually move. Her hands took his and tugged him down for a small kiss.

"It will be alright," she reassured him.

He nodded without a sound and followed her silent instruction as she pushed him towards the door. Droids. Right.

He turned the pair of them on and had them follow him back to their bedroom in what must have been record time. At this point he was thankful for his cool logic of months ago. If one did break down the other would be there as backup. Because he would be no help at all, he could already acknowledge that. His heart beat so fast he literally felt he was about to burst.

Padmé was reaching awkwardly for some pillows and he quickly leapt over and thrust his own set behind her back.

“What can I do?” he asked as she succumbed to the first droid’s instructions.

He settled beside her as she propped herself in the middle of the bed. Surprised, he watched her take his hand, interlace their fingers, and bring them to her lips.

His breath caught in his throat, but his heart decided to stop all together, even if for a single beat, at the simple action

I love you so much his brain automatically responded.

Her eyes raised to focus on his intently.

“*You make me...so happy,*” she told him with a slow seriousness that commanded him to listen. “This baby will change our lives; *nothing* can change how I feel about you. All you need to do is understand that.”

He drew her close and blew silent breaths over her lips as the world around them fell silent. There was no reply he could think of that said what he wanted to. Leaning forward he touched their lips. It said more than words could, at least he hoped so.

She was his everything. That was how he understood what she felt for him.

Her lips stilled beneath his then she pulled away and eyed him carefully.

“Ah — owww.”

There was a cry. Nearby. Coming from someone nervous and scared.

Anakin’s mind screamed into consciousness, his hand already reaching for his lightsaber though his eyes were not open.

But just as his weapon hit the palm of his hand, he felt what it truly was. He groaned quietly and placed his weapon back next to the bed.

Without even opening his eyes he carefully sat up.

It was one of the twins in the room across the hall. Waking though it was the middle of the night.

Next to him Padmé began to stir in her sleep.

She needs more Anakin thought worriedly. *She’s still in pain, she’s so tired.*

What she’d done yesterday... yes, she must still be in very much pain.

With tenderness he reserved for a single person in the galaxy he leaned over to her and delicately brushed his fingers up her side. Stroked back her hair and whispered “I’m up. Relax, go back to sleep,” and finished with a very soft kiss to her forehead.

She didn’t reply verbally but he could feel her start to recede from consciousness. For a moment more he caressed her, waiting to ensure he didn’t have to ‘suggest’ that she needed more sleep. But she was so exhausted she was already gone.

So he left her be. Climbed out of from the warmth of the blankets and padded across to where his sleep shirt lay discarded on the end of the bed.

Their new bed, really. His thoughts drifted to their room upstairs. Originally chosen because the bed was biggest and the view most spectacular from there. And the room had seemed appropriate for the few short hours of their honeymoon they’d shared. Because that had been his first time, it had seemed to hold a special place in his memory. That was their room. Or maybe their room had been in her suites in Coruscant. Or her apartment in Theed. Or wherever Padmé lay in the other side of the bed.

But now they’d moved. Downstairs, to be surrounded by the gardens. To be opposite the baby’s room.

Anakin had to chuckle softly at his own ignorance as he slipped across the hall. Babies. Not baby. He had to keep remembering that.

Of all the things he’d foreseen in his time, been able to sense, to feel, you’d think one of them would be that there were two lives inside her. He’d slept beside her for almost four months complete. How had he not felt them there beside him? Or even under his hand when he touched her? She’d gotten so big — of course there were two.

As he walked out into the hallway he snagged one of his gloves off the table of Padmé’s brushes, reminded of a promise made to Padmé long ago — to take his gloves off when he touched her intimately. In fact it may even have been in that room upstairs where she’d made the request. With a small sigh he remembered her claims that the leather felt more foreign on her bare skin than the metal. And since it annoyed her to have him leave one of his hands lying by his side, he’d simply come to accept his arm as a part of him. More so than he believed he would have without her seemingly self-centred demands.

Anakin tugged the well-fitting glove over his metallic hand and had to give pause. With hindsight he could suddenly clearly see how Padmé had enticed acceptance of his arm. The attachment of the mechanics and the first tentative steps into his marriage bed had occurred at roughly the same time.

Oooh she is a crafty thing.

She had forced a connection in his brain — to touch her without thinking, without considering the difference between his two mismatched limbs. With an incredulous grin he crossed the hallway. How had he not seen that! Was there anything she wouldn’t do for him?

For him the reality was that his fingers couldn’t carry out any kind of intricate task deep in a leather glove, flesh or metallic. But with the babies so small and fragile, the metal had no give in it, to cradle their still soft heads. The leather covering provided just enough cushioning to let him feel safe he wouldn’t hurt them.

The open doorway to their room had upset noises wafting out of it.

"I'm here," he said gruffly.

Apparently his voice didn't take well to use in the dead of night. Under his fingertips, a button on the wall responded to his command and the lights came up to a soft glow.

Just enough so he didn't have to squint.

So he could clearly make out which of their twins was making so much noise. He strode to the single baby bed and looked down at them lying there side by side. They were both awake, it turned out. But only one was upset.

"What's wrong?" he asked, trying to be soothing like Padmé was.

She did that very well. Sounded so reassuring and soft. Even he wanted to relax and fall to sleep when he'd heard how she spoke to them.

His own attempt came out a little clumsy. He sounded rough and a little annoyed. Like he felt, really. After all, it was the middle of the night and yesterday had been hectic. Now it was time for sleep — surely they were exhausted too?

But he picked a screaming Luke up anyway and charged on.

And couldn't help but let slip with a wry smile, his mouth quirking up at one side. Because Luke immediately settled into his inexperienced arms with nothing more than a few hiccups.

"That's it?" he asked in disbelief.

Annoyed at being called from Padmé's side for no apparent reason, he was already letting his forehead crinkle up. But the fact that Luke's tiny body radiated contentedness, just at being held, was such a soothing sensation that he had to settle for the quick grin that slipped out.

Leaning over the other baby Anakin put his hand over her forehead and murmured gently
"go back to sleep Leia."

The very basic mind was easy to influence and her eyes immediately closed beneath him.

He nodded quite proudly to himself. A quick glance at the chrono showed they were probably about fifteen hours old now. And already he'd mastered putting one to sleep.

Now for her twin. He grabbed a blanket from a small pile of them. Laid Luke down for a moment and wrapped the boy up, just like Padmé had shown him.

Anakin shivered a little and quickly did up the buttons on his shirt. Thought a moment, and grabbed another blanket for Luke.

"Now, why are you up?" he asked the baby softly.

Nothing.

Just wide blue eyes staring up at him.

"It's sleep time," Anakin reminded.

Well he was definitely holding Luke's curious attention but nothing more.

Shuddering again Anakin looked out toward the darkened garden. It certainly was chilly tonight.

Without another word he made his way along the corridors. Out to where the cold, dark fireplace was.

Were this any other day they'd have a fire burning here before they went to bed. And the embers would remain to just flicker out in the morning. But with the arrival of the twins near lunchtime, he hadn't built one tonight. There had seemed no need as Padmé had been confined to their bed. In either agonising pain — unable to move — or unconscious, he hadn't really left her side.

Now, however, he was cold. And since the only warm place he could think of was tucked up in bed with her warm body by his side... Well he didn't want to disturb Padmé. He briefly reached out to her, thinking of what he'd witnessed the day before. Yes, she desperately needed to sleep.

Beneath his feet the freezing ancient stone gave way to a warm rug that poked up between his toes.

He looked at Luke and then the cool hard floor.

"I'm sorry, I need two hands," he consoled.

Then knelt beside the hearth on the rug and lay Luke out.

He waited a moment, his hands lingering over Luke in preparation. But no screams came, not even a whimper. Just Luke's wide curious eyes. He waited longer, sure their baby would complain. But not a peep.

Finally Anakin decided he was wasting his son's good graces. So he hurried to gather up sticks and firestarters. One part of his consciousness always focused on the youngling.

A little later he had a successful fire heating the room.

"Why are you up?" Anakin asked again.

He stretched out on the floor. Propped his face up on his elbow. Looked down at Luke. Who by now was starting to whimper.

Thoughtfully Anakin reached out. Usually human minds were too complicated to read accurately beyond overwhelming emotions. But maybe he could get something more from one so young.

Hungry. Luke was hungry.

"Now?" Anakin asked in disbelief.

After all the trouble he'd just gone to. Now they had to wake Padmé?

Then he had a sudden thought. A stroke of brilliance on his own part. He reached over and kept studying their baby. Stroked his fingers across Luke's cheeks then put his fingertips very carefully to his forehead.

“You’re not hungry,” he grinned triumphantly.

For the briefest of moments Luke settled down and returned to just looking at him. But apparently his small tummy did not agree. Anakin sighed as the message was re-sent to his brain and he started up again.

“Luuke,” he whined childishly.

Luke’s cries got louder.

“Shhhh,” Anakin struggled to sit up.

He took Luke back in his arms and for a little while he settled but now it was becoming harder to stop him. Luke was hungry.

Even though Padmé must have fed him three times before she’d gone to sleep last evening.

“Alright,” he finally sighed.

He climbed to his feet and slowly made his way back to their bedroom. Poor Padmé. She needed her sleep. Really really needed it. She was exhausted. And sore.

“Anakin?” she grumbled sleepily into her pillow.

Anakin stood at their bedroom doorway, trying one final time to convince Luke he wasn’t hungry. But apparently it wasn’t to be.

He looked up to her and sighed deeply. She was very tentatively rolling onto her back.

“I’m so sorry. He’s hungry I don’t know what to do,” Anakin rushed desperately.

And felt her small swell of love at his ignorance.

“Come here,” her voice came across their moonlit room.

Anakin hurried to the bed as she struggled to sit up. He hurriedly freed one arm from Luke and grabbed his pillow from beside her. Slipped it behind her back to prop her up.

Luke was getting louder but like it was written in his very being, this time Anakin didn’t falter. He very carefully transferred Luke into Padmé’s arms. Then settled beside them.

Unfortunately all three realised a problem at the same time. As Luke’s mouth reached up and found only fabric.

“Damn, no buttons,” Padmé sighed.

She was so worn out. Her body screamed in agony. At how it had been torn apart and needed time to heal. At how it needed rest. Even looking down at Luke’s desperate face made her want to cry. She was so utterly exhausted.

But ever pragmatic, it took only a moment for a plan to start forming in her head.

“Can you get my robe for me?”

She turned to Anakin who was already bounding off the bed. Bounding! She could barely roll to her side without pain. He was by her side handing it to her in no time.

She could barely fathom all the moves needed to change out of her nightdress. Even without standing. All she wanted was to sleep. Wake up again in a few days time.

Still, she couldn't escape now.

"Take Luke for a minute," she handed him back to Anakin.

Anakin laid her robe beside her and took the baby. And didn't he complain about it.

Even as she was shifting to tug the nightdress over her head Luke screamed at being denied. But hearing Anakin's response filled her with deep relief. A satisfaction in knowing everything would be alright. All he said was a simple

"it's alright Luke. Soon, I promise,"

but the love behind it was undeniable. Anakin loved their children. She was sure of it now. In an understated way it made her life perfect.

Slowly Padmé reached for her robe and without standing carefully tugged it round her. Raising her hips to let it cover her legs too was out of the question. She definitely didn't have the strength for that. So she just tugged it half around her waist and pulled the covers up.

She leaned into Anakin's arms and took Luke back. And pretty soon Luke had quieted down. Settled happily into her arms. And was torturing her poor nipple once more.

"Hey hey, don't hurt me," she murmured to him.

Her fingers traced over his face lovingly and he seemed to respond.

Tiredly her eyes closed and her head fell back. All she wanted was to sleep.

The sound of Luke gulping was the only one in the room. Luke, and then suddenly Anakin as well.

"What?" she asked him curiously.

She opened her eyes and looked at her young husband.

To find his eyes fixed firmly on her revealed chest.

"What!" she asked again, a smile creeping on her face as she pulled her robe tighter.

Anakin gulped again and then looked up to her. One very naughty smile on his face.

"I'll have to get used to sharing what has always been mine."

Her eyes widened at him. The way he said 'mine'. The possession. All she could think of was to reprimand him for being so vulgar. Otherwise she'd blush in total embarrassment. Because she wasn't comfortable with the idea of this yet. To be willingly half naked, so often. To have a mouth other than Anakin's, there. And in a complete innocence that was the opposite of any mindset Anakin had when he was completing a similar act.

She'd opened her mouth to complain. But before a single sound had come out Anakin had eagerly removed his eyes from her chest. His mouth swept down to cover hers almost as

hungrily as Luke. And with such incredible sweetness that she gave a barely audible whimper.

Tenderly Anakin stroked the sides of her face. He took care not to hurt Luke, but it was obvious where his thoughts were focused. On her. Completely on her.

The breath was literally sucked from her mouth as he brushed his fingers over the sensitive skin of her cheeks. Waves of his unruly blonde hair brushed at her too, his kiss incredibly tender and entirely too charming in its tenderness.

In a way that he never would have understood, he was reassuring her. She had no doubts he still loved her. No matter what his inexperience had borne witness to that afternoon. He still wanted her. Which she had privately feared as aching ripped through every part of her since. That he would never want to touch her again. Never want to be with her.

Now, he was more desperate to kiss her than ever.

And she eventually felt confident enough to let Luke rest in just one arm. So she could bring her other arm up to Anakin's neck. To the soft wisps of hair that rested there.

Suddenly she gasped in pain. Went to pull away from Anakin so she could coax Luke to let go. Except Anakin murmured into her mouth "stop hurting her Luke," and then kissed her even more passionately.

Which was fine for him except she couldn't help herself. She laughed loudly at him and had to pull away.

Anakin groaned and, eyes closed, hovered barely in front of her face.

She was still laughing at him as she looked down to Luke.

"Mmmm, Anakin," she sighed.

Her hand went around his shoulders. Because, undeterred, he started kissing at her neck.

"Mmmm, Padmé," he replied cheekily, mocking her.

But his tender lips bespoke a more simple love for her that dwelt within him.

She let her fingers caress his back. But fiddled with Luke for a moment until he settled once more and the pain on her skin lessened.

And she had more immediate problems. Namely, Anakin. Who appeared to have no conception of how different her body was going to be for a little while.

"Anakin," she said softly.

His kisses were becoming more ardent. And his hands, which couldn't decline the offer of far too accessible skin.

"We can't," she said simply.

It was a taunt. Because now his hands were very well-practised. They were calming but arousing. And his lips were amazing.

"I'll put Luke to bed and then we can —" he trailed off but his husky breathless words left no doubt of intent.

She gasped as his mouth opened her robe more fully and explored her flesh. Exposed to the cool air of the room, but warmed by his determined mouth. Very determined.

"We can't — I — I can't," she whimpered.

Tears sprung to her eyes at Anakin's familiar touch. Although she was so tired, she couldn't deny it. She wanted him. She wanted him so badly. She wanted him to show her how much he loved her. That he did indeed still love her. And he had to stop, because she couldn't have him.

Her fingers curling in his hair at her regretted words seemed to catch his attention. He glanced down to Luke. Then met her eyes.

The removal of his eager mouth calmed her a little.

"It's too soon, I can't," she told him tenderly.

The disappointment was written plainly across his face. She relaxed back into her pillows once more. Let the back of her hand caress his cheeks. His hard, sculpted chest. And eventually his hands fell away. Sinking down beside her seemingly resigned.

His hand came up and he watched as Luke's entire little hand wrapped half-way around his pinky.

"I've always had to share your time, I don't know if I like sharing your body," he grumbled quite seriously.

She grinned at his petulant complaint. Lay her head on his shoulder.

"Our younglings will grow out of their need for my body, but my body's need for you will always remain."

Anakin's heart really pounded in his chest now.

I love you. I love you so much he wanted to lean over and whisper to her.

He looked down distractedly as Luke pulled away from her.

"Don't tempt me," he finally murmured.

To remove some of his desire he took Luke back and raised him to his shoulder.

He climbed off the bed and started heading back to where Leia slept soundly.

A thought occurred to him and he turned around. Even with his hand patting Luke's small back he focused all his attention on Padmé.

"Soon though, right?" Anakin suddenly wanted to be sure.

On his shoulder Luke hiccuped as soft laughter fell from her lips. And it was not what he wanted to hear at that time. 'Yes definitely' or 'a few more hours' or 'tomorrow, Anakin' was

what he wanted to hear. Not laughter.

"I don't know," she eventually grinned to him.

She was already settling back into the covers. Yawning and putting her head on her pillow.

"I'll be waiting when you're ready," he suddenly grinned and left her with that thought.

In his arms he felt Luke fall asleep. And behind him he felt Padmé do the same. Though she could banter like she was fully-rested, she was still exhausted.

And now she could get a little more sleep. If only her body would heal.

Without a sound he lay Luke back down, unwrapped him from his blankets. Settled him in amongst his bed again, next to his sister.

Then swiftly returned to Padmé's side. He thought of the fire burning happily in the sitting room. And hoped it continued to burn until Leia decided to wake.

Padmé was restless. Really really bored. Anakin seemed to be handling things on his own. Which amazed her in its own right. But it left her bored. She had to wake every few hours to feed a baby. But apart from that he left her to sleep. And now that she had slept for almost a day entirely, she needed something to do.

A new set of walls to look at, in the very least. Even the view of the beautiful garden, where the birds settled outside her window regularly to sing, was no longer enough.

"Anakin!" she called loudly.

Hoping that he was nearby.

He appeared a moment later.

"Padmé," he bowed his head like a servant.

"I need entertainment," she instructed him.

Then glanced at him questioningly.

"Where are the twins?"

He glanced back down the corridor.

"Lying in front of the fire. The morning is cold outside your bed."

"You left our babies lying on the floor!" she asked, shocked.

"You called for me!" came his startled reply.

"Go take care of them!"

He turned to leave, then paused.

"I can feel them," he said triumphantly. "They're fine. Would you like to join us?"

An image of herself and her little family in front of the fire fluttered her heart in its simplicity.

But the pain in her mid-section pushed it away. She looked down at her lap with a sigh and shook her head.

“I don’t think I can walk that far.”

Anakin looked over her worriedly. Moved closer and ran his hand down her cheek. But he seemed to push the worry away and look at her a little pleadingly. Could it be he missed adult conversation too?

“Could you not try?” he asked longingly.

Just to make sure he really tugged at her heartstrings.

She looked from him to the door. And back again.

“I really don’t think I can,” she told him sadly.

He watched her, like he could will her body better. But the truth was she needed time to heal.

And suddenly a thought popped into his head. And he lit up.

Without saying a word he bent down into their bed. And scooped her up into his arms.

“Anakin!” she squealed, catching her arms around his neck. “What are you doing!”

But she laughed deliciously in his ear and planted a kiss on his cheek so he knew it was all right.

“It’s warmer by the fire!” he told her with playful indignation. “And I would like your company.”

He strode purposefully out of their room.

She suddenly flushed and ducked her head. And was — embarrassed?

“Padmé?” he asked cheekily.

“Naboo tradition,” she grumbled as if it was an explanation and turned away.

“Tell me,” he coaxed.

“Newly wed couples... A newly wed bride gets carried by her groom across the threshold of their new home.”

She shook her head away.

“Like this,” she finished softly.

And he suddenly had the need to squeeze her so tightly.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I would have carried you —”

he broke off. They didn't have a home. They had been far too concerned about consummating their marriage in the short time they had to follow any traditions. And his new arm had certainly been far too painful to be carrying anything anywhere on their wedding day.

But now they had a family. And once he had told her that his home was always where his mother was. And since they'd been married, the war, returning home had been to wherever Padmé was.

Now, perhaps, home was where their family were together.

"Home is where you are," he told her softly. "And Leia, and Luke."

He stepped up to the doorway of the warm sitting room. And stopped to turn his eyes to her with a depth of love that drove his heart to beat, no being could ever know.

"You are still my bride, and forever will be," he told her.

And quietly stepped past the doorway and in to join the twins. Eyes locked with hers.

Her mouth came forward to brush over his with a little hesitation. Silently he had to fall back against the wall as her tenderness overwhelmed him.

Eventually his arms began to ache and he had to pull away. She looked him in the eye as he walked to the soft lounge and laid her out. Fell to his knees before her. Her eyes glanced over his head to the twins. And he turned his head to follow her gaze.

"See, they're fine, just like I said," he grinned.

Then surrendered to her tugging hands and crashed back into her smiling mouth.

Forgetting themselves enough, Anakin was eventually climbing up to cover her. Her soft entreaty to be careful kept him from resting any weight on her but he touched her. Felt her warmth. Enjoyed her hands and her kisses and the love that fell out of her uncontrollably.

Their kisses eventually tempered out until Anakin's head just rested on her shoulder, pressing his lips to her neck.

Looking across at the twins who by now were getting indignant that their parents had absolutely forgotten about them.

"I'll bring them over here," Anakin murmured into her ear.

Without her prompting. Without her having to say one word. Yet knowing it was exactly what she needed. It was just what had to be.

He climbed off of her and carried them one at a time to the floor beside her. Made sure their blankets were tight enough around them to ward off the cold.

And Padmé rolled onto her side to play with their little hands. As he watched, all was... perfect.

Anakin looked up, pleased, as Padmé seated herself beside him.

The sun bathed them in its early morning light as it sparkled against the silent lake. The twins had just gone back to sleep. Everything was peaceful.

“Good morning,” he greeted.

She leaned over and pressed her lips to his in response.

“Yes it is.”

She shuddered as his hand came up to caress her bare neck.

“Your hair looks lovely,” he said quietly.

She took his complement with a quiet “thank you”. But her attention was on the still water. The sun, not yet warming it was still so low in the sky. The crispness of the air. She pulled her blanket a little tighter around her shoulders but didn’t shudder. She wasn’t yet cold.

Today she’d taken the trouble to dress properly. And already she felt much more normal.

She lifted her steaming cup from the table. Loving the feeling of its warmth in her exposed hands.

“I was thinking I’d go into the village and get some supplies today,” Anakin eventually broke the quiet.

She nodded but didn’t say anything out loud.

She felt so much better today. Physically. But it had influenced her mental state as well. Now everything didn’t seem so hopeless. Anakin sat peacefully at her side. Their newborn babies slept quietly inside. And the world around them just — waited.

“Aren’t you tired?” she asked him thoughtfully.

Staring out at the way the lake sparkled light as if it were a jewel. Refracting different colours off its unblemished surface.

“You’ve not slept properly in three days.”

“Ahhh, but you have,” came his pleased reply. “And don’t you feel better for it?”

She considered the retreating aches. How much lighter she felt after shedding the weight of two full grown babies. Her body’s slowly repairing fabric. And how every time she was tired Anakin just let her sleep. Yes, she did feel better.

“Much better. But you haven’t slept. Although you don’t seem that affected.”

He reached over and stole her cup, taking a brief, cautious sip.

“Jedi trick. I’m fine for now. But it only lasts a few days — so two or three more nights and then you’re going to have to get up too.”

He said it so lightly that she relaxed back into her chair. Took her cup from him and sipped at it once more.

“I’ll be gone a few hours, will you be all right here alone?” he asked.

Both their eyes focused on a bird as it landed across the water. Its large wingspan open to drag on the air and slow its descent. Too far away for the noise to reach them, though the splash across the water was spectacular.

“We’ll be fine.”

She watched the solitary bird as its head ducked under the water for a moment then came up again. Swallowing something down quickly.

Anakin’s thumb was suddenly against her neck.

“I wasn’t asking about ‘we’. Will you be alright?”

He stroked her softly and she tilted her head to the side. Let him caress her for a brief moment.

“I’ll be fine,” she told him softly.

He seemed to take her assurance and let his thumb slide away. But his hand trailed down her side and slipped into hers.

They sat in silence, just enjoying the breaking morning. Each other’s company.

Almost an hour passed with their quiet conversation as the world woke around them. That is when Luke and Leia woke too.

Anakin threw a look back to the house and went to stand.

“Wait.”

She squeezed his hand and pulled him back.

“I’ll see to them. Why don’t you go get those supplies?”

He paused, seemingly unsure.

“Truly, I’m fine,” she grinned.

She stood and pulled him to her, giving him a deep, reassuring kiss. With the twins continuing to cry on she pulled away and settled into his arms, looking out onto the lake for a final moment. Anakin’s chin rested against her head momentarily and she enjoyed his warmth.

“Just let me make a quick list,” she finally smiled.

Pulled away and gave his cheek a soft kiss.

He nodded dumbly, trailing her into the house.

Obi-Wan started awake and quickly reached for his buzzing com. He’d gotten lazy as he lay waiting in this town, waiting for Anakin’s inevitable return.

He just knew Anakin was nearby. It stood to reason that either he or the Senator would return for more food at some stage. It seemed to be a simple waiting game. All he had to do

was keep his awareness stretched out in the market place each day and Anakin would come to him.

He looked at R4 as the buzzing stopped and the droid began projecting an image of Master Windu.

“Obi-Wan,” he began immediately, all pleasantries forgone. “We can no longer spare your talents in searching for your missing apprentice. Grievous has been located and Sidious has made a critical error. We need you, now.”

Obi-Wan nodded with understanding.

“I will return to Coruscant as quickly as possible.”

“He hasn’t surfaced?” Mace asked in a quieter voice.

“No. I have the feeling he is nearby but for some reason our paths don’t seem to cross.”

“Very well.”

They nodded to one another and the transmission quickly ended.

“R4. Plug into the outlet and book me onto this morning’s first public transport back to the capital. It’s time to go.”

Anakin watched as his beautiful Padmé snagged a data pad from the table near the door. Tapped a few keys quickly then handed it to him.

“Have fun,” she grinned.

He leaned over, pressed another kiss to her cheek.

“I won’t be long,” he promised.

“Don’t rush,” came her reply.

He stopped, stunned. She didn’t want him around?

“Anakin, I know you’re bored with the monotony of this house. It’s alright, I understand. Take your time. Go looking for a brawl or something while you’re there.”

She waved him away and he hid a small smile. She was bored. She didn’t like the monotony. To someone who’d spent the first half of the year stuffed into frozen or sweltering bunkers, anything was better. To a Jedi who was constantly surrounded with the love of Padmé and the wonder of two completely new babies, fulfilment was close at hand. Boredom was not.

A brawl could be fun though he teased himself.

“I’m not bored,” he grinned firmly at her.

Another kiss, this one lingering a little longer. He pulled his cloak from the chair and tugged it around his shoulders even as her lips were locked against his. Then the twins were crying out for attention even more and she gave him a gentle push.

“Come back to me.”

Every time he left. That was what she said. Always before with fear. Sadness. Anticipated longing. But not this time. Weeks, months did not stretch out before them. And very little danger awaited.

“Always,” he assured in standard reply.

He gave her hair a soft caress then moved towards the dock as she turned to the twins.

His task before him now held much excitement. Supplies were not his main mission on this brief trip.

As he guided the small watercraft into an empty berth aside the village it was all he could think about. Her list tucked safely in his pocket. But his attention firmly on the just opening registry office.

He walked up to the desk and bantered lightly with the elderly clerk. Was handed a data pad with many fields to fill in. Nodding his thanks he took the data pad away. Sat on a long bench to let the sun stream through the ancient windows and across his shoulders. He let himself feel his breath sliding slowly in and out of him as he keyed in information.

Name: **Luke Skywalker**

Sex: **M (First of twins)**

Date of Birth: **minus three standard days**

Race: **Humanoid**

Place of Birth: **Varykino**

Mother: **Padmé Amidala**

Mother's Maiden Name: **Naberrie**

Mother's Date of Birth: **minus twenty-seven years, eleven months, sixteen days**

Mother's Planet of Origin: **Naboo**

Mother's Planet of Current Residence: **Naboo**

Mother's Occupation: **Senator**

Father: **Anakin Skywalker**

Father's Date of Birth: **minus twenty-three years, five months, twenty-seven days**

Father's Planet of Origin:

Anakin thought for a moment. He didn't actually know. They'd been sold to gamblers before he could remember. And his childhood had been lived on one planet. It would do.

Father's Planet of Origin: **Tatooine**

Father's Planet of Current Residence:

He paused again. The field flashed at him, waiting for an answer. He'd already put his name. There was no reason to falsify further information. But what would his planet of residence be now? He thought of Padmé's fears that the queen wouldn't wish her to serve in the senate any longer. That she would have to retire though it was surely not what she wanted. No, they would be returning to Coruscant. All of them. But for now, life was peaceful. Complete. And there was only one place life was truly like that.

Father's Planet of Current Residence: **Naboo**

Father's Occupation: **Unknown**

He was proud of what he was. Who he was. But there was the truth and then there was just plain stupidity. Writing "Jedi Knight" on the birth certificate was asking for trouble.

Date of Parents marriage: **minus four standard years, eight months, six days**

Place of Parents marriage: **Naboo**

Prior Siblings: **None**

He grabbed the second data chip the clerk had handed him and pushed it in the other side of the small device. He was just about to copy all the information across. So he could change a few fields and have Leia's completed too. But something stopped him. Just because they'd been surprised with two of them, didn't mean they'd be treating them as one being. And now was a good time to start.

So he removed Luke's data chip and inserted Leia's. Started typing in her details too.

Name: **Leia Skywalker**

Sex: **F (Second of twins)**

Date of Birth: **minus three standard days**

Race: **Humanoid**

Place of Birth: **Varykino**

Mother: **Padmé Amidala**

Mother's Maiden Name: **Naberrie**

Mother's Date of Birth: **minus twenty-seven years, eleven months, sixteen days**

Mother's Planet of Origin: **Naboo**

Mother's Planet of Current Residence: **Naboo**

Mother's Occupation: **Senator**

Father: **Anakin Skywalker**

Father's Date of Birth: **minus twenty-three years, five months, twenty-seven days**

Father's Planet of Origin: **Tatooine**

Father's Planet of Current Residence: **Naboo**

Father's Occupation: **Unknown**

Date of Parents marriage: **minus four standard years, eight months, six days**

Place of Parents marriage: **Naboo**

Prior Siblings: **Luke Skywalker, 0 years (elder twin)**

He finished fiddling with her document then returned to the desk to allow the clerk to start his own manipulation.

The man took the chips and started pushing buttons. Then stopped almost immediately and looked up at him strangely.

“Amidala?”

Anakin nodded silently, looking down at his hands.

“I didn’t know she was pregnant!”

Why would you? Anakin’s mind murmured in quiet joke to himself before it immediately cut itself off. No one had known. Though he’d always thought that more of a pain for Padmé than anyone else, he was confronted with a new thought. The people of her planet loved her. Total strangers worshipped her for her strength, for being their saviour queen when he was still a child. And now he’d fathered her children in secret, and none of those people knew. Hmmmm.

Anakin didn’t say anything for so long that the man returned to his button pushing. But looked up in surprise a second time.

“Hey, you’re —”

Anakin looked him intently in the eyes and focused. Waved his hand as he cut the man off and said

“Lucky to have the same name as that Jedi.”

“So lucky to have the same name as that wonderful Jedi,” the man grinned up at him.

Anakin nodded along, waiting patiently. A few more buttons and then

“You’ve forgotten to put your occupation.”

Eyes came up to lock with Anakin’s once more.

“My wife is so unlucky to be having twins with an unemployed husband at this time of war,” he said with another wave of his hand.

The man looked at him sympathetically. Then continued doing his job. He finally handed two chips back to Anakin and said

“All done. Both births are officially registered. Congratulations on your younglings.”

Anakin ducked his head with a small acknowledgement and went to leave. But a sudden warning flashed in his awareness and he focused his attention back on the man.

The clerk had lifted his glasses and was walking after a colleague with the words “you’ll never believe what —”

As her husband he couldn’t allow that sentence to finish. Let alone the conversation to start.

He quickly reached out for the man’s vocal cords with his hand and silenced him.

“Excuse me?” he asked and the clerk looked back to him.

Anakin hurriedly released him and the clerk coughed confusedly.

“Yes?”

“The births you just registered were for simple mountain folk.”

It killed him to do it but he waved his hand and gently altered the weak mind in front of him.

Erased the memory of encountering his beloved wife’s name today from the registry official’s mind.

Then took his chips and went to find supplies.

Finally surrendering his quest for Anakin to more pressing matters of galactic security, Obi-Wan headed for the waiting transport.

His fists tightened as he stood by the vehicle, looking around the small town. He was so sure they’d find one another here. Something about it. Something in the force, whispered to him that Anakin was so close at hand. If he only held out a few more minutes, a few more days.

Shaking his head at his own inability to let go he climbed in the waiting doorway. Anakin was a grown man. He had to realise that. Once the war was over more resources would be poured into finding him. Right now the Senate was dissolving before everyone’s eyes, Sidious was out of control and getting cocky, and Grievous had made a mistake.

These were the true evils that had to be faced.

Although a run-away Knight and an errant Senator had been priority for some time now too. It was her disappearance that attracted media attention, and his which attracted Jedi.

For now they would remain missing.

If only he didn’t have that feeling. That one that said ‘turn around now! You’re just missing him!’

Like every other time he listened to it. He turned his head for one final glance back.

Just like every time he imagined something, he was sure he saw the ends of a dark cloak swinging into the supply store manned by Anakin’s admirers. But this time he didn’t have the seconds needed to check up the lead.

This time he was needed elsewhere.

“He’s here!” one girl hissed to her friend and both turned to let their eyes wander over the figure they both lusted after.

His cloak slightly caught in the stiff breeze it lingered in the doorway before following him inside.

As he approached the lodge from the water he could see Padmé out on the terrace. Strolling back and forth. He squinted, focused all his energy on enhancing his vision. And saw she did indeed hold one of the twins.

All the nervousness he’d felt when in town, of being discovered, of too many questions just drifted away. He was truly home. And while Padmé totally alone had been the most alluring site his mind could conjure up for many years, it was starting to become something different. Padmé holding a baby was starting to fulfil him as much as the alone fantasy had.

He gave her a wave as he returned to the dock and she and — Leia? — came down to meet him.

“Hello again,” she greeted.

He jumped from the small craft, leaping up the stairs and taking the pair of them in his arms. Padmé got a soft kiss as he greeted her. Then, on an afterthought, Leia did too.

“How was your trip?” Padmé asked.

He walked back to the boat and retrieved the supplies he’d picked up.

“Successful. I’m glad to return. Although I must say, you’ve mystified me.”

She led the way back towards the house. In his awareness he reached out for Luke, and felt him sleeping peacefully in his bed.

“How have I done that? You’re hard to confuse.”

He set the supplies down on the table and pulled out the one he didn’t recognise. From her list, but totally unknown.

“Ahhh! They had them!” she said excitedly.

“But what are they?” he asked.

“To help me sleep,” she said cryptically.

At that moment Luke could be heard waking up.

“Give me a moment and I’ll show you.”

Anakin shrugged, settled himself and took Leia from her to wait. When she returned Luke was grizzling to be fed. They all watched fascinated as Padmé mumbled

“Let me see if I remember how Sola used to do this.”

She took the small package in her hand. And gave it a decent whack against the corner of the bench.

Anakin jumped, startled. Luke cried out as the shock noise upset his already distressed brain. And Leia just eyed her mother suspiciously.

But Padmé grinned, rubbed the top over with her thumb then put the spot to Luke's mouth. And he immediately quieted and started drinking.

"It's milk," she explained to Anakin.

All eyes watching Luke drink hungrily.

So I can have you to myself again? Anakin's mind immediately popped up.

But he thought for a moment and realised that it wasn't about reclaiming Padmé as all his own.

"So I can feed them during the night?"

She nodded and "Mmm hmmmmed," to him.

"Very clever," he noted.

He paused then thought about the chips in his pocket.

"Come sit," he lit up.

Leading the way to the now pleasant day outside. Pulling a data pad from his pocket as he sat.

He inserted the chip that came to his hand first. Inserted it and handed it across to Padmé.

She settled next to him and accepted the data pad. Questioningly, but silently.

She gasped as she read.

"Oh Ani, what have you done?" she smiled sadly.

Her eyes scanned down the information with regret but it was regret he didn't feel.

He held up the other chip.

"Is not that the father's task?" he asked softly. "On Tatooine it was."

He wasn't answering her question and he knew it.

"You should have let me do it," she said quietly.

"Why? You would change their last names and leave my name off of it," he angrily predicted.

"Yes, I would," she didn't try to deny. "Anakin if anyone else sees this they'll know. My name alone will raise attention."

"I'm about to spend their whole lives denying they're mine," Anakin said quietly, stiffly. "They can be ignorant of my status when they're old enough to understand. Let me have this now."

She sighed and put the data pad down.

“Anakin.”

She stood up and moved to him. Forced his head to rest against her stomach. Stroked his tense head very soothingly.

“The Jedi council won’t find out that you’re their father. But these two will always, always know. I promise.”

He sighed and closed his eyes. He hoped so.

“I suppose I couldn’t have left the father space blank anyway,” she conceded, letting their brewing argument fall by the wayside.

Appeasing him. He could see through it, but he was grateful.

“Didn’t they ask about our names? Or all these blanks?” she asked suspiciously.

“I dealt with it,” he pragmatically returned.

“Oh?”

Her tone did not leave room for contradiction. Tell her now.

“Hey you’ve — got the same name as that famous war hero,” Anakin imitated, his voice changing from a deep tremor to his regular one halfway through the sentence.

“You left your job blank — unemployment is running high,” he continued, pitch altering again.

By his side Padmé giggled.

Ahhh, so this amuses you does it beautiful?

“Hey colleague person, you’ll never guess who has just had children. Simple mountain villagers,” he finished, again changing to his own tone from the heavy baritone for the last three words.

And Padmé truly laughed heartily beside him.

“See, I’m good at being their father already. I’m protecting my family with all the skills I have!” he told her proudly.

His hint of laughter crept in too quickly though. Although they both knew it was wrong, the sudden change in their lives allowed it to briefly be funny.

“Alright, I guess you’re forgiven,” she mock grumbled good naturedly. “What other mischief did you get up to there?”

His mind quickly jumped from his mundane trip to the village. Over to Padmé. And exactly how far she was willing to go to keep up the charade. The ‘my twins are fatherless’ plan that she had revealed to him right before they were born.

“Padmé...”

He trailed off because the words didn't come. Because he couldn't think how to tell her that — that she could tell people. Those she loved, and trusted, he didn't fear them.

"There'll be times I'm gone that you might feel lonely," was how it came out.

Wrong. It came out wrong.

"I mean, you should get someone to come to Coruscant and be with you," he tried to hurriedly clarify.

Hoping not to dwell on the 'when I'm gone' aspect.

"I have the twins," she reminded him.

"Yes and the twins and I have bored you after three days. I mean company, to help. Your family for instance," he probed.

"I'm not telling them," she reiterated.

"Why? I don't see how it hurts me to have your parents who love you come be with you."

"Anakin we have been through this," she ground out.

Her good mood was suddenly gone once more.

"I won't have them know because we risk them accidentally telling someone. And they won't believe I started a family without a husband I love very much."

"So tell them you're married," came his simplistic reply.

"Anakin. I will not tell them! You don't know the danger you ask me to put them in."

His annoying smirk irked her even more.

And when he leaned over and kissed her cheek she just about blew her top. Before he totally surprised her.

"I didn't say tell them we're married, I said tell them you're married."

Anakin paused but she had no reply. Had he gone mad? How would she explain two newborns and no father? How would she possibly get around that?

"Your husband is involved deeply in the workings of the Senate and was put into hiding just after you were married. You only see him occasionally. But you wanted your parents to meet Luke and Leia," he tempted her.

And she let herself be tempted. It did sound remarkably plausible. After all, had she herself not had to hide a few short years ago? Her parents. She'd been so worried about her baby, about Anakin, about hiding, that it had never really occurred to her what they would think. How she would explain the twins to them. That they would even meet the twins.

But now that he offered a good enough cover story it was something she could see happening. Perhaps even wish to happen.

“And wanting to stay protected you sought the protection of the most noble of creatures you could find — a Jedi Knight — to watch out for you until your precious husband could return,” he pushed his little fantasy just a little too far.

“No,” she immediately stopped him.

“Why not?”

“Sola and mum — they thought you had a crush on me.”

His ears perked up at that. He turned to her with a huge grin on his face.

“Last time you came. If I turn up with an oddly absent husband, Leia, Luke, and you with that ridiculous pride that you’ve been radiating for the last few days — no. Absolutely not. They’re not that naïve.”

He sighed, looked out on the lake again.

“Do it when I’m gone then,” he softly conceded.

“You really want them to be with us don’t you?”

“I don’t want you to be lonely and yes, I think they should meet Leia and Luke. Poor babies are going to be confused enough as it is, they should get to at least have a grandmother to dote on them. And since mine...”

He trailed off but enough had been said.

She reached over after a moment and caressed his thigh.

“I will give it some consideration but I promise nothing Anakin.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

Coruscant was a mess. Obi-Wan realised that almost as soon as his ship fell out of hyperspace. News that the Emperor had fled the city planet and gone into hiding was blasting on all holoNet channels. It was also conveyed by Master Yoda when the two of them met on a landing platform.

The Senate was in an emergency session, calling for nominations of a caretaker Chancellor. Palpatine's reforms had been rescinded as unconstitutional.

As he folded his hands over his chest, Obi-Wan looked down into the massive audience chamber. Jedi were stationed at every entrance, to ensure security and freedom in the voting process. Senators sat quietly in their seats, insulated from one another.

For the first time since he was Qui-Gon's Padawan, Obi-Wan had a waking vision.

He was staring down at Mas Amedda, trying to gauge by the blue-faced reactions which way the votes had fallen.

And slowly in his place, superimposing itself on the image of the House Speaker, was Anakin. Lightsaber drawn and looking up at Obi-Wan as if daring him to attack. Though he knew it wasn't reality Obi-Wan watched the vision with interest. The pods appeared to all move, one at a time. Each one releasing from its berth and clustering behind Anakin, as if one Jedi could protect them all. Anakin seemed to turn, look to the pod where Jar Jar Binks was taking Dormé's instruction, then turn back with a fleeting, secretive smile.

Like he knew where the Senator for Naboo really was, and the reason she was missing amused him.

The Senators clung to him like innocents who'd lost their way.

"Protect us!" they all seemed to be crying. "Please! We need your help!"

"Don't worry." Anakin looked up to Obi-Wan defiantly. "I will protect you all."

Mas Amedda slowly faded back to where he belonged and the force-gifted vision of Anakin was gone.

Very interesting. Anakin no longer the aggressor but the protector?

"That will protect you from the cold," he reassured in a whisper.

Carefully he tugged up the corner of Luke's blanket, tucking it in a little tighter.

"Ok Luke, shhhh," Anakin tried to soothe the boy.

And for once it seemed to be working. His cries lessened to the occasional whimper, and he actually seemed to be drifting off to sleep. Anakin perked up, quite pleased with himself. His two-week crash-course introduction to children wasn't going too badly. But that was the first time he'd successfully put one of them to sleep without any help from Padmé.

He let his gaze drift over Luke with the eye of an incredibly proud parent. Everything about his little son was perfect, as far as Anakin was concerned. Just looking at his tiny face scrunched up as he dozed tugged the corners of Anakin's mouth into a smile.

Anakin closed his eyes briefly, trying to send soothing feelings to Luke through the force. Convey his own delight at the baby's very existence to their boy's innocent little mind. When a small movement caught his eye.

Immediately alert his head whipped up. A list of possible threats already began forming in his mind. Here for him. Or Padmé. Or both. Jedi. Obi-Wan. Naboo Royal Guards. Captain Typho. Reporters. None of those options struck the fear into his heart he expected them to. But they did make him wary. He lifted his hand a little. Tucked Luke in even closer. No one would find out about them, about their love for each other, about their children, unless Padmé wanted it so.

Of that Anakin would make sure.

He squinted out towards the far side of the lake. Enhanced his vision enough to see something skimming across the surface. Visitors for them to be sure.

He had a brief moment of panic that his subtle altering on the registry clerk hadn't worked. That someone had been looking for them. And tipped off. But he stretched out with his feelings and didn't sense anything particularly threatening. Or even inquisitive. Only that in his arms Luke had fallen into a deep sleep.

Anakin was quick to reason it was probably better to face whoever it was on his own. He quickly retreated back inside from the fresh air of the balcony. His footsteps towards the twins room were hurried but not impatient. His only wish was to sound out the visitors. Not give up his precious moment with his son. He only paused when he stepped through the doorway to the twins' room and stood over Luke's empty bed. No feeling in the force warned him of impending danger. No threat to his baby prince. Or either of the women in his life. Eager to keep away prying eyes his moment of hesitation was brief. He could enjoy time with Luke later. Anakin's glance briefly wandered over Leia.

Fast asleep. With a smile Luke was returned to his bed. And his sister given a quick kiss. But the feeling of their visitors was growing stronger.

He hurried to the dock to greet the craft.

As it approached he could see who it was. Padmé's parents.

Anakin blinked in surprise. His conversation with Padmé a few days ago flashed into his mind. Had she told them? Even as he wondered the question the answer was already firmly in his mind. No. She had seemed pretty determined not to tell.

Plus she seemed a little more possessive since the twins birth. Grateful for his attention. Welcoming of his freely-offered kisses and affection. Content to keep him and their twins all

to herself, though she did insist they would return to Coruscant. No — she couldn't have told them without asking his opinion first.

This must be some terrible coincidence that they decided to come here. Still. Maybe his babies would get their grandparents after all. With a pause he identified a hint of irritation sliding up his spine. Suddenly he could see Padmé's point of view in this argument. Nice as they had been to him, he didn't want them here.

He wanted to spend this short period of time with his own little family. Gobbling up every second of their presence. Not having to entertain others.

It wasn't surprising when he felt their utter confusion at his presence. At anyone's presence, if he were reading them correctly.

"Hello," he greeted them softly, bowing as they docked.

They were tired. Weary. Scared. Worried? At that point he was determined to be polite. They weren't intentionally butting in.

"I'm Anakin Skywalker," he said quietly as they emerged from the boat.

Her father nodded and replied

"Ruwee Naberrie."

"I know. We've met before."

Anakin got a sudden, very quick and clear flash of a thought.

I've never met this gardener before.

He wanted to laugh at the man's rationalisation.

"I'm sorry, I can't seem to place you. When have we met?" her father politely inquired.

Although it was obvious they were both very upset over something and wanted to be left alone. In the house. Then again, Anakin didn't particularly want their sudden arrival terrifying Padmé and the twins while the three of them slept.

"Not here. I came to your house once."

He stopped himself. As her bodyguard? I'm a Jedi Knight? How did he say it without identifying himself as one of the many things he'd recently run away from?

"With Padmé."

Both their heads shot up. To focus on him very intently.

"Is she here!" her mother almost cried out.

Anakin nodded soundlessly.

And could only watch on surprised as they turned to embrace each other tightly.

"What is she doing we were so worried!" Ruwee started proclaiming.

He was boldly striding towards the stairs before Anakin stepped in front of him. Suddenly instinct just took over. Padmé's happiness first. Her wishes were to be left to sleep, and if she

couldn't stand the husband who adored her interrupting, then her parents would certainly be no exception.

"I'll take you to her but she's incredibly tired and has just fallen asleep. Perhaps you could leave her be until she wakes?"

He knew he didn't need a force suggestion for that. He was a parent too now; he knew what it was to care for your child's well being.

Jobal nodded but had grabbed her bags and was hurrying towards the house.

She was already halfway up the stairs to the second floor when Anakin entered.

"She's down here," he almost whispered.

He indicated the hallway on the ground floor and made to lead them.

"Down here? Why is she sleeping down here?" Jobal asked him.

But received no reply. Anakin couldn't even bring to explain the romance that had led to the marriage that conceived the children whose nursery dictated their parents sleep downstairs. Nor did he want to.

The walk along the corridor was made in silence. Before they could get there Anakin made sure to subtly shut the twins door. One surprise at a time.

He led the way to their bedroom. And smiled fondly at the site of Padmé tucked up in a mess of blankets and sheets. All on her side of the bed. His heart tripped and his hand suddenly felt heavy. It yearned, relentlessly tugged him towards the bed. The palm begged to be allowed to rest on her stomach as the rest of his body curled up behind her.

While he placed soft kisses on the exposed stretch of pale neck.

It took every ounce of Jedi restraint he'd not touched in months to hold himself back.

Anakin made sure to stand at the doorway as her parents rushed past him. Now was not the time to reveal his was the other side of the bed. And she was under so many covers they wouldn't notice the change her body had yet to recover from.

True to their word they were silent. But brushed Padmé's hair back and kissed her forehead to assure themselves she was safe.

Leia took that moment to wake up. He felt her return to awareness in the force.

Not now princess!

As subtly as he could he slipped away. Dashed across the hall before she could cry out.

"Ok, ok I'm here," he whispered as he picked her up.

Turning, he made to shut the door behind him. But there stood Ruwee, confused.

Anakin had been followed.

And Luke must have felt Anakin's sudden moment of panic, because he suddenly cried out and awoke too.

With his arms already full Anakin shot a hopeless look towards Luke. Was stunned as Padmé's father moved into the room curiously. Didn't stare at their baby son very long before he leant in and skilfully picked him up.

"Hush," he said with a soft soothing tone that bespoke much practice already.

He turned his eyes to Anakin who stood silent with Leia against his chest.

"These are newborns."

Anakin just blinked. His heart dropping. They'd been caught.

"One of you had better tell us what's going on."

Anakin couldn't move. All this time they'd been so careful.

"Padmé it is then."

And before Anakin could stop him he was returning to where Padmé slept.

She stirred in her bed as someone touched her, irritated. Anakin had said he'd leave her alone.

She groaned and opened an eye to see

"Mum!"

Her mother's arms wound around her tightly. She was, crying?

"Padmé we're so glad you're safe. We've been so worried," Padmé heard in her ear.

"I'm fine," she whispered.

"We thought you'd been kidnapped or killed or — why did you just disappear like that? And why did that young man say you were sore?"

The sound of Ruwee clearing his throat turned both their attentions to the door.

Jobal fell back onto her heels at the sight of both men with a small baby lying against them.

"Oh," Padmé whispered softly.

Anakin just looked very confused. A little contrite, maybe saddened, but confused.

"What is going on?" Ruwee asked sternly.

And straight away Padmé decided to be truthful from the start. To a degree.

"I disappeared to have my baby," she told her parents quietly.

She sat up against the bed head. Raised her arms and indicated for Ruwee to give her Luke.

"Oh Padmé," her mother said quietly.

Watched as Padmé took Luke. Ran her fingers over his tiny face.

“And it turns out there were two of them,” she grinned down at her little boy.

Her mother sunk beside her on the bed.

Ruwee eyed Anakin suspiciously.

“So how come you are here?” he almost threatened.

Padmé shot her father a murderous look.

“Because I needed someone with me and he’s my friend. I felt a Jedi could protect me best.”

The look Anakin sent her swelled her heart. He didn’t mind her lie, even though they’d discussed this previously.

“You’re a Jedi!”

Anakin came and took his place on the side of the bed beside Padmé.

“This is Leia, and Luke,” he tried to distract Padmé’s parents.

Padmé took a deep breath. Beneath the blanket her fingers brushed his. Grateful for his support. For saving her. For keeping their secret. The mere sound of his voice immediately calmed her. Reminded her of all the reasons why it was a secret. How special her relationship with Anakin was to her. How much secrecy, and his reputation, were paramount above all else in her estimation.

This was the point. Two weeks, three days old and the denial of their father that he feared so much would begin. And he had done it to ease her discomfort.

Beneath the blanket she clasped at his fingers.

Thank you she silently called to him.

That’s when Jobal asked the killer question. Interrupted Padmé’s quiet appreciation of her husband.

“Why did the Jedi approve Anakin coming to protect you? When that other one came to our house we were so worried. Who are you threatened by?”

Jobal stopped herself short at the painful look in Anakin’s eyes. And the room fell into silence.

“Please tell me you are here legally,” Ruwee said softly.

Anakin just smiled sadly down at Leia.

“No I’m not.”

And Padmé felt terrible all over again.

“Could you leave us alone for a moment?” she asked her parents.

They went to protest but seemed to take in Anakin’s bowed head and nodded.

“Here, take Luke and Leia,” she said as some kind of consolation.

The twins were quickly handed over and hurried out of the room. Then Padmé turned her attention to Anakin. And only Anakin.

“There’s still time for you to go back without me. You could say I suddenly asked you to transport me home in secret, as a friend. You could return to the Order now and no one would suspect.”

Anakin raised his finger to her lips, then kissed her softly.

“I would have to give up all the beautiful things here,” he murmured to her. “And that would include you. Which I will not.”

Their lips joined for a moment more before she pulled away. With a groan Anakin pulled her back to him. Kissed around her lips, even though he knew his timing was totally inappropriate.

If Padmé’s parents were going to stay he needed all the kisses he could take now.

“You have to tell them to leave,” Padmé coaxed him.

“What for, why me?”

She smiled tiredly at Anakin, kissing his cheek as she lay back down. He followed, hovering over her anxiously. His eyes drifted from her gaze, to her lips and back again. Dipping into her mouth every few seconds, even as they spoke.

“You can make it sound like it’s a security risk. Say they’re endangering me. I love them but they have to go Anakin.”

His heart swelled at the thought that she somehow placed his company above that of her parents. She held his hand in a firm grip as he shot a look to their bedroom door.

“If they stay here tonight you’ll be pretending you aren’t the twins father and sleeping upstairs away from me.”

He closed his eyes and briefly pressed his cheek to hers. If he had to do those things to make Padmé happy then so be it. It would simply be a bringing forward of the performance he would have to begin in a few weeks anyway.

“That’s alright, if it makes you happy,” he softly assured.

Their eyes locked. She lifted her hand and pressed carefully to the back of his head. The sweetness in her lips was incredible. With her parents just outside she passionately possessed his mouth. Held him to her and made love to him with no more than her lips and tongue.

He fell helplessly into her, following her movements. Weaving left as she tilted right in perfect sync. Joyfully giving himself over to her domination.

When she pulled back from him, he was panting. And their gazes were intently locked.

“Make them leave,” she reaffirmed.

Padmé watched him as a determined look come over Anakin's face.

"It's possible someone could have followed them," he decided.

"Exactly."

It was a plausible excuse. Just enough truth in it to get them to leave without requiring hard evidence of proof. So Padmé could kiss him like that any time they wanted.

In satisfaction, he leant into her warmth.

"They should go now," he murmured.

He pressed his lips to her forehead then stood up.

"I'll send them in to say goodbye and then they're gone."

"I love you," she sighed, cuddling back up into their blankets.

"I know," he grinned, a hint of mischief briefly visible.

He left her to sleep as she'd previously wished and strode out into the main room. The twins and their grandparents were sitting in front of the fireplace. All four felt extremely on edge. It washed out of the room and stretched the force unnaturally around the walls.

It manifested as fussiness in the twins. They were both complaining, verbally and emotionally. His normal senses heard their picky and annoyed whimpers. His force-soothed heart felt their distress just as clearly.

"You have to leave," Anakin said on entrance.

With a quiet authority that indicated power and maturity. Both of which he would have to feign in this conversation. So he did his absolute best to sound like Obi-Wan.

"No. Why?" Jobal wanted to know.

"We are here to hide, you may have already alerted those looking for Padmé by coming here. It's best you leave right away."

He was clever to use what he already knew about them. The way they'd responded when he first met them to threats on Padmé's life. He had to make it sound even more serious now.

On the inside he felt the pain they did, at the thought of being forced from their beloved daughter. Especially when they'd just discovered such a life-shifting event.

Before Ruwee could make any comment Jobal had decided for the both of them

"Alright."

Anakin had to physically stop himself breathing a sigh of relief. That was too easy.

"Do you know who their father is?" Ruwee asked, looking down at Luke.

Ahhh, yes, he had gotten off too easy. The killer question. Now he had to flat out deny his own children, and they weren't even a week old.

He longed for one of them in his arms, to give him strength. But without so much as a blink he firmly replied

“Padmé won’t tell, she doesn’t intend for people to know.”

It was a truth he was sure. The kind of truth Obi-Wan told when he intended to lie, but a truth none-the-less. And it too seemed to work.

The grandparents just accepted and turned their attention to the new twins. His twins. And quite frankly he wanted them to go so that Luke and Leia could be his twins again, and Padmé could return to her sleep.

His family was quite happy until these two had arrived a short time ago and threatened the delicate balance. The previous conviction he’d had that the twins spend time with their grandparents had flown out the window.

“Please, you must leave,” he encouraged them again.

“So soon?” Ruwee asked, almost forlorn.

Anakin nodded emphatically.

“It would be best.”

For my family he silently added.

Padmé awoke peacefully, well-rested from a good night’s sleep and for a moment utterly content. Her parents were gone. Ani had whispered it in her ear when he came to bed last night.

Then the silence of her bedroom turned her head suspiciously to the bed beside her. Her fingers reached out almost automatically, brushing lightly over the empty space beside her. His warmth didn’t even linger beneath the covers, he must have been awake for quite some time.

Clearing her throat, she swallowed, giving her body time to energise. She carefully sat up. Her hair fell across her face creating an annoying tickling sensation. Frustrated, she brushed it back, already reaching for a clip and clasping the thousands of strands away from her face.

“Anakin?” she called.

Her heart was filled with a sudden longing for him. Like she hadn’t been with him in months. Like something could be wrong now. There was a flutter of nervousness in her chest but it was short lived. She chastised herself for acting as a lovesick teenager would when he hurried through the doorway. Still, she couldn’t stop the sigh of relief from escaping.

As always he seemed to sense her mood. He was wiping his hands on a cloth but he quickly threw it over his shoulder.

Without a word he walked towards her. Sat on the bed at her side. Twisted his body awkwardly, reached his hands up and cupped her face with his customary gentleness. Their kiss was soft as she initiated it, leaning into him. Needy for his touch she slunk her arms around him. Soon enough she’d pulled him in close.

More! her soul seemed to cry out. *Anakin please!*

Before she could claim too much of him though, his hand raised to her hair. As if in compensation, it stroked her hair soothingly while his mouth disengaged.

“Good morning,” he greeted with eyelids that drooped to focus on her lips.

“Good morning,” Padmé returned, allowing a smile to creep up as Anakin’s eyes met hers.

“I have a surprise for you,” he grinned.

Padmé’s eyes fluttered closed as Anakin leaned forward and kissed her again.

“Get ready to go out and call for me when you’re done,” he instructed when they pulled apart once more.

She smoothed her hands over his shoulders. Her palms enjoyed the feeling of his solid flesh, hidden as it was by so many layers. And her mind enjoyed the curiosity he peaked.

“I’ll come help you dress Luke and Leia,” she smiled.

Enthusiastically she started moving. Anakin stood to allow her more freedom. But in the same breath he decidedly told her “No.”

She crooked her eyebrow at his response. He only watched her as she took hold of her robe and shrugged into it. The cold permeated the house this early in the morning. Though she felt the day would be somewhat warmer than those they’d encountered lately.

“Surprise,” he reminded.

With a slight smile and a shake of her head she left him alone. If he wanted it to be a surprise so be it. It only hurried her towards her shower to find out what his surprise was.

“Dress Leia and Luke warmly,” was her only reply.

They shared a long moment of silence. Nothing more was exchanged than eye contact, but enough was said. A mutual attempt to suppress smirks of restrained joy. A quick burst of love here and there.

Finally Anakin started to retreat with a quiet “I’ll see to the twins,” and left her.

Her body had a life and spark as she collected various objects from around their bedroom. Not soon enough she had discarded her sleepwear and was allowing warm water to cascade over her body. Her shower wasn’t long. Anakin’s ‘surprise’ intrigued her. She wrapped a towel around herself and moved into the small dressing room. Five minutes later she stepped out into the long hall and eagerly into the nursery opposite.

It was empty.

Her interest was piqued. Curiously she strode down to the warm kitchen. Where Anakin stood near the bench, closing the lid of the picnic basket. He then handed the container to Threepio. The droid already had a blanket draped over his arm.

Turning her head showed her a baby blanket spread out over the large floor rug. And two little babies laid out on it.

“A picnic?” she grinned to Anakin.

He nodded. She could hear him leaning back against the counter. Could almost picture him folding his arms across his chest. When she turned her head to throw a quick glance at him, she established she was right. And his eyes almost seemed glazed over as he watched her.

“It will be warmer today. The perfect day to show the babies the meadows,” Anakin informed.

Kneeling down at their sides she reached for Leia. Her tiny daughter lifted easily into her arms, making nonsense sounds against her shoulder.

“Good morning!” she brightly greeted.

She nuzzled her own nose against the little girl’s. Leia grabbed a handful of her hair and gave a brief screech. Padmé laughed softly. Very carefully she pried the miniature fingers free of the strands.

Footsteps approached behind her. She bent her head back to look up. Anakin loomed above her. Just as the weight of one of her thick winter cloaks laid across her shoulders.

“We’re ready to go.”

Twisting her head she followed Anakin’s movement as he knelt beside her. His arms bent in offering and she carefully handed over their baby. The sight of Anakin with the tiny life in his arms stopped her heart for a brief moment. He looked so delicious, coaxing Leia’s free hand back into the blanket he’d wrapped her in.

“Do you think they’ll be warm enough?” he worried.

She quickly slipped her arms through the sleeves of her cloak so she was ready to leave. Then Padmé leaned down and picked up the marshmallow that was Luke clothed in heavy winter warmth.

“Good morning to you too,” she greeted their son.

She kissed his little cheeks and held him close too.

“They’ll be fine,” she assured the young, worried father.

Padmé climbed to her feet. Her eyes were still glued to the bundle of perfection in her arms, tracing her fingertips over her youngling’s warm cheeks.

“Alright Threepio, let’s go,” Padmé instructed.

R2 started whistling and trundled in after them.

Padmé laughed and nodded, opening the door out onto the terrace.

“I see this is a family outing then,” she noted to Anakin.

“I would never leave R2 behind,” he told her seriously.

She stepped outside expecting to be hit with a blast of cold wind. Luke had already been concealed within the confines of her warm cloak. Instead the day was still. The sun shone brightly and the sky was clear and promising.

“Oh!”

Anakin nodded, leisurely strolling across the stones. His strong confident form delicately cradling the incredibly disproportionate body of their baby. The sight lightened her own steps as it did her heart.

“What do you think daddy’s packed for lunch, hmmm?” she talked softly to Luke.

When he reached the wide track that led away from the house and up into the meadow Anakin slowed for her to walk by his side. So uplifted by the prospect of leaving the house, Padmé nattered quietly to his only occasionally responsive form. His silence didn’t matter though. His short answers made it obvious he was listening.

They reached the peak of the small rise that signified the beginning of the expansive field. The snow hadn’t melted yet but it wasn’t a complete blanket of white either. Late winter bulbs had popped through the ground and were rearing their heads. The waterfalls rushed with the sound of crushing half-frozen ice.

By her side Anakin looked from Leia to Luke then back again.

“Look,” he told them decisively.

He took a deep breath of the cool air and surveyed the wintry landscape.

“It’s beautiful.”

His gaze settled on Padmé’s face. She clearly understood his double meaning but said nothing. In that look of absolute devotion Padmé understood something else. This picnic was a last hoorah. Her agreement with Anakin had been one month before they returned to Coruscant. One month for him to enjoy their sweet family before she had to go back. And the twins were already three weeks old.

As much as it pained him, he was sticking to their bargain.

Very briefly, Padmé transferred the weight of Luke into just one arm. And gave Anakin’s back a soft rub.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He nodded. For a brief moment his chin fell to his chest in regret. His eyes slid closed and he was still, silent.

“Let’s enjoy our day,” he finally returned.

His eyes lifted, first to her face, then the sky.

The day is beautiful, just like you he smiled to himself.

“Come on Threepio, could you lay the blanket out over here,” he instructed.

The baby in his arms wriggled a little. In their short lives he’d noticed how much Leia and Luke both liked to be touched. In response to her movements he crooked his finger and ran his knuckle over her nose. She sighed and he swore he could feel her trying to free her hands.

“No no, keep your hands inside. It’s too cold,” he quietly soothed.

Using his fingertips he made sure she stayed wrapped up. Tended to her with all his attention. She frowned and seemed to make an almost growl. Anakin lifted an eyebrow, then laughed gently. He'd also learnt how to head off her temper tantrum. With all the fondness in his heart he brushed the pad of his thumb over her forehead. Back and forth until she mumbled and shrunk back into her thick layers.

"Anakin?" Padmé's voice interrupted.

"Hmm?" he looked up to her.

Only she'd already settled on the blanket. Her legs tucked up under her and her skirts perfectly surrounding her. Luke nuzzling sleepily into her chest. He'd completely forgotten about her. But his eyes gazed down at her and had to wonder how she always looked so flawless.

"Will you join me?" she gestured.

Quickly Anakin kneeled. A little sheepish at how his daughter could command his attention so easily. Almost in compensation Anakin leant over and kissed Padmé's cheek. Her skin was chilled but not frozen. Perfectly smooth and sparking with energy when he brushed against it. His whole body was zapped alive by that mere second of touch. His heart tripped over itself in eagerness. His mouth turned up into a genuine smile. All from one simple kiss. That wasn't enough though.

So he twisted a little more and covered her mouth. Their kiss was long, soft. Finally he pulled back. Nuzzled her neck affectionately.

"Anakin," Padmé laughed indignantly.

She pretended to pull away but he grinned against her skin and stepped up his efforts. Little nibbles just below her ear. A soft drag of his lip down her hairline. When her mouth turned into his they shared each other's kiss tenderly.

For Anakin the whole world disappeared. The crisp ice of the frozen-over meadow. The roaring of the waterfalls. Even the two sweet little babies he'd dedicated most of his recent days to. Everything fell away to the feel of kissing Padmé. All the pleasure centres in his brain lit to sparkle. Made him want to scream out in happiness.

Luke and Leia obviously did not approve. Both let out a simultaneous wail. Like they had made a quiet agreement to put and end to being ignored.

Padmé pulled away, gasping in a breath. Anakin's own were heavy, but he didn't care. Their eyes lingered on one another in a perfect second of silence. Then Leia grumbled again, calling Anakin's attention back to her.

He flashed his precious bundle a big grin. It didn't receive much of a response. Taking another path he cast a feeling of serenity, peacefulness, love into the force. He knew it probably shouldn't, but the fact that both twins immediately responded pleased him. Made him proud. A quiet Leia made no complaint as he laid her out on the blanket beside him.

Once, Anakin Skywalker had believed life to be cruel, and unforgiving. It had taken his mother from him so brutally. Denied him love he craved from anyone for almost ten years.

Denied him Padmé's love the first time he sought it. But as he laid Leia out next to her brother and watched over the pair of them, life had changed. His outlook had changed.

He would always miss his mother. But he had been given much more than he had ever dared wish for.

He stretched out beside the pair of them, propping himself up on his elbow.

"You two are *perfect*," he announced to them.

Luke, then Leia, got his lips on their forehead. Then he nuzzled his mop of hair at their small, covered stomachs. That's when he felt Padmé's hand. Gentle and sure, resting on his head. Stroking down the back of his neck.

He groaned and snapped his head around, biting her palm.

"Padmé," whispered over his lips as he caught her.

His kisses danced up her arm, her shoulder, her neck. Until she moulded their mouths together. Their lips locked, hungry. More involved as time went on and both cupped the other's face. Despite the fact that a pair of very young twins lay between them.

It was almost inevitable that Anakin eventually tried to coax her to him. They were mindful of Leia and Luke. Knowing that Threepio and R2 kept a close watch on the infants as well. And Anakin couldn't stop a tiny piece of his awareness from constantly monitoring the younglings. But ultimately, as Padmé covered him and he could fully embrace her in his arms, he was pretty much consumed. His hands trailing up and down her back. His mouth feasting excitedly.

"I'm so hungry for you," Padmé's voice whispered over his ear right before it was enveloped in the warmth of her mouth.

Her impatience tore at his failing grip on sanity.

In surprise Padmé's body shivered. Anakin gripped her tight and rolled. Pinning her beneath him.

You're still all mine she satisfyingly acknowledged to herself. It had been a long time since he'd been anywhere but beneath her. A long time since he couldn't hurt her. And even though he supported his extra weight now, his warmth covered her. Secured her. Claimed her. Declared himself as all hers.

With a gleeful whimper she sunk her fingers into his hair and held him to her. Dipped into his mouth affectionately.

It seemed to serve to spur him on. His hands began to roam over her body. Up and down her sides. Stroking her cheeks. Coaxing her arms to hold him closer.

The quiet mumblings of the twins beside them suddenly turned into a loud, ear-piercing scream from Leia. There was a simultaneous freeze of lips. And she stilled her thumbs so that they no longer smoothed over his cheeks. But Anakin didn't pull away. So she turned her

head towards the little ones. It was clear there was nothing wrong with them but being forgotten.

Still, it had pulled them from the building lust that she wouldn't be able to bring to conclusion. And reminded her of the other things they now had in their lives.

With a small snort of amusement she turned her head and kissed Anakin's cheek. He grinned up at her like an excited puppy expecting more. He intertwined their legs and rolled again, so that he lay with his back on the blanket. And Padmé above him.

Knowing that she would get lost in Anakin if she didn't at least move away, she settled herself a little further down. Tucked her head under his chin. Beneath her cheek he took a deep breath, raising her head. Then his arms wound further around her. Stroking her hair as she rested against him.

Making her feel as content and in love as the day she'd suddenly realised just how much she cared for Anakin. Her attention turned from the unstoppable hands. To the fruits of their labour.

"Don't worry, we didn't forget about you," Padmé soothed lightly.

She freed one hand from Anakin. Rubbed lovingly at Luke's belly, then Leia's.

"Speak for yourself," Anakin teased.

She raised her head and propped herself up on her elbows. She hovered over him, their lips brushing as they spoke.

"You make me forget almost everything," he murmured, lifting his head and capturing her lips once more, if only for a brief second.

Padmé pulled back and rested her head on his chest. Slowly, independently, both had their hands drifting over to reassure the twins with touch. Secretly keeping their other hands clasped together.

She carefully brushed her fingertips over their tiny noses. Their foreheads and cheeks. So small, so perfect.

A bright flower just off the edge of the blanket caught her eye. Curiously she reached out and plucked it. Rested her weight on her elbows as she studied it.

"Hmmm?" Anakin made a noise to try and capture her attention.

He strained to see what had her so fascinated. His head was tilted back as far as it could with her body weighing him down, but still he couldn't see.

Padmé held a flower in front of his face, and then almost immediately tucked it into his hair.

There was a small kiss to her wrist before she could get away from him.

"You look most handsome," she declared with a laugh.

Her fingers brushed his hair, smoothing it down. It served to heighten the intensity of his feelings for her. Anakin's eyes followed everywhere she went, even as she turned her attention back to Luke and Leia.

For a brief moment he turned his head away. Found a flower of his own and tucked it into her hair. Brushed strands back from her face. Tucked them up behind her ear. Purposely stroked his fingers over her creamy cheeks, her neck, brushed against her ears.

That brought her attention back to him. He smiled softly up at her and mimicked her with a rough voice

"You look most handsome."

Leia let out a yelp and he grinned, then wrapped a hand around Padmé and propped himself up as best he could with her weight on him.

"You don't have hair Leia, otherwise I'd get you a flower too," he pacified.

He reached for another flower, plucked it from the ground. Slid it into Padmé's hair too. The image of Padmé's gaze dancing over him, his hand pushing a flower into her hair fizzled through him. And her giggle encouraged him to do it again. Until she returned her attention to the twins. Then he simply contented himself to thread the stiff blooms into her hair.

When the intricate design of her hair had no places left to poke a stem through he turned his attention to his young daughter and son. The pair of them looked so helpless, covered in layer after layer of cloth. Bundled up against the cold. He smiled at them. Reached over and tickled his glove of fingers over their tummies, just enough for them to feel it through all the garments.

They squealed and laughed and turned their heads towards him. And he broke out into a heartfelt smile once more. Because Luke and Leia's happiness could enliven him almost as much as Padmé could.

And because the time when he would be able to enjoy their happiness was so rapidly coming to a close.

They had lasted almost an entire month without any threats to their existence until Padmé couldn't take it anymore.

"We have to go back," she announced to Anakin one dinnertime.

She didn't ask him. She didn't give him a reason. She just told him. And he wouldn't accept it as easily as she'd like him to.

"No! It's too soon!" he replied.

"Anakin, I know," she soothed. "But I have to. The restructuring is not going well and Naboo's interests are being left by the wayside. Jar Jar was never properly suited to being a full time senator."

She sat beside him as the fire flickered behind her brightly.

“I’m sorry.”

But she didn’t back down. And neither did he. He had agreed on a month but now that the time had come, he couldn’t face it. He would not allow the most precious thing he had ever been a part of to be hurt. The very thought of threat to them tore at him, and if he only knew one thing it was this: he loved the three of them too much to take them back to that place.

Back to Coruscant.

“No,” he refused, standing up and rounding on her.

“We can’t. We won’t,” he told her determinedly.

She remained where she was, perched on the couch. It reminded him of another rejection. Of her refusal to enter into a relationship with him because of duty. Now she wanted to hurt them again, why did she still not trust him?

“I can’t stay here and watch this happen. I’m sorry that you don’t feel the same way, but your life is not for me to make decisions over. You have got to chose your own path, no one can choose it for you.”

Anakin shook his head. The time they had had together as a family was too short. If they were to return now and the threat still lingered someone could get hurt. Not to mention the questions that would be asked of his whereabouts. And Padmé’s children. His children. He would either forfeit his rights to the life he’d been raised in or deny his own offspring. And he couldn’t pick — no man should have to make that choice.

“What about the twins?” he asked dejectedly.

He wouldn’t allow her to go back to Coruscant alone, he already knew that. And from the moment his cells had begun to take shape his path had been chosen for him, whether it was his will or not. He was to be a Jedi, and the Emperor, the Sith Lord, had to be exterminated before his force-sensitive children grew much more.

Anakin sat in the front of the gondola, staring back at the retreat that had become his home. They would be back of course, but it felt like... Like they were leaving behind their short life as a family.

“You’ll see it again, you know,” Padmé tried to soothe, almost like she’d read his mind.

“I know.”

His reply was sad and forlorn. He had coaxed Padmé into coming here, and he would follow her back to her life’s work. His own future was less clear. He’d left the Jedi voluntarily, neither formally resigning from the order, not intending to come back. And now his status was more undecided than his emotions.

The ride to the small town passed by far too quickly. R2 and Threepio were waiting for them at the end of the jetty with their luggage. Padmé hopped out of the boat, took Leia, and went to contact the resort staff to tell them to return to work. A speeder waited patiently just a

few footsteps away to begin their journey back to civilisation. There was such an air of finality to it.

Everything he had come to associate with being happy was reverting to the way it had been before.

A soft cry in his arms drew his attention automatically. Luke. The one thing that would always be his. Their twins.

“Hey Lukie, it’s ok.”

He moved the infant to his shoulder and patted his back softly.

“What’s wrong? Shhhh, what’s wrong my prince. It’s alright,” he carefully calmed the boy back down.

But didn’t believe his own words. Everything was not alright. Soon he wouldn’t even have the twins, Padmé anymore!

“It’s time to go,” she told him.

Anakin nodded, and in a brief second felt something in the force he hadn’t even detected. Padmé. In terrible pain, almost agony, at being removed from the place that had brought them together. When they had come here he remembered joy. Pouring out of her like the waterfalls up in the meadow. And now there was nothing but desperation. Sorrow.

Even with a twin each, he placed an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. Padmé pressed into his chest. Rested her head against him. Didn’t protest, or pull away.

“I’m sorry,” she finally whispered.

Without any other words exchanged he nodded and let her go. Hand in hand they didn’t even enter their village square.

Two days later they were at the main hanger in Theed.

Padmé looked up as there was noise behind her. Anakin was just entering the cockpit, giving her one of the saddest smiles she’d ever seen.

“They’re settled, Threepio’s watching over them,” he relayed of the twins condition.

He quickly plopped into a seat when he caught sight of the flashing light, strapping himself in as Padmé pulled back on the lever. The ship glided into hyperspace at her command, now firmly pointed towards Coruscant.

Without turning to look at him, all her thoughts were unerringly on Anakin. She didn’t want to be without him either, but he didn’t seem to quite grasp that. His argument was that she would have the twins — but he didn’t understand that they were no replacement for him. Love, fulfilment, purpose, he had come to represent them all in her life.

Now was not the time to argue over that again though. She swivelled her chair and captured his hands. Dejected, his gaze seemed to bore into hers, like this would be the last time.

Padmé couldn't force a smile. Not this time. They were returning to a pattern of months of separation followed by passionate but far too brief encounters — what was there to smile about?

"We will make it work," she promised him quietly, freeing one hand to release her restraints.

With all the tenderness she could muster on so little sleep she moved over him, pinning him to the chair. His head reflexively leant forward, resting on her shoulder. Tired, miserable, she could read every emotion that flickered on his face.

Everything she herself was feeling. Now was not the time to be heading into the midst of a confusion-riddled Coruscant. With Leia and Luke far too small to do more than eat, and Anakin's quiet conversation so firmly entrenched in her daily life, all she wanted right now was to take all three of them back to the lake house and never ever leave.

For a long time they sat in the silence. Both hoping for something — anything to happen that could keep them together. Padmé knew in her heart, though, that Anakin was about to be gone. Even worse, he would be on Coruscant, near, but staying away to avoid suspicion. If anything that may hurt even more.

His face burrowed into her neck, reminding her of the heartbroken young man in her arms. Without ceremony she cupped the back of his head, holding his head in comfort as she rubbed his back, trying to soothe and reassure. Knowing that he was hurting was almost worse than the pain of her own situation.

A loud yelp slipped out her lips. With an abruptness she wasn't suspecting Anakin had forced her out of his lap and back to the floor. He was on his feet immediately. Their gazes locked he hurriedly started shedding layers of his clothing.

"What are you doing?" she asked in total confusion.

He didn't answer though. Soon he was down to nothing but his pants, and he was dropping back to his seat, pulling Padmé down on top of him.

He took each of her hands, returning them to his head and now naked back, before he buried his head back into her neck.

"Need to feel you," he seemed to mutter. "It's going to be so long — don't let me go."

"Oh Anakin," her sigh drifted over the curls of his ear.

With soft strokes her hands were playing over his skin with all the love she possessed. Nothing could make up for the time they would be apart, but the feel of his skin under her fingertips now was all she could get.

The hair at the back of her neck started to pinch as he dug in even closer. With a quick snap and fiddle her hair was down while he let out a startled cry at being left with only one set of caressing fingertips. But as the curls tumbled down around him, brushing the skin of his bared shoulders, surrounding his face, he let go.

He squeezed her tight and she shuddered, his bare, muscular arms encircling her, fingers digging into her waist. She pressed kisses to his hair, suddenly understanding something.

This was the last time they were going to have alone for a long time. And even though it would hurt, and it was too soon, they had to be with one another again — completely — before he was gone.

She took his head and carefully engulfed it in her arms, guiding him down to the valley between her breasts. His lips immediately hardened and he pulled back up to her neck.

“No, I’ll hurt you Padmé,” he grumbled as his hips shifted tellingly.

“You will,” she acknowledged quietly, guiding his head up to look into her eyes. “But if we don’t make love before you go, it won’t just hurt me, it will destroy me,” she firmly replied.

Their faces were barely moving together but after a moment, they were there. Kissing, softly passionate in an attempt to forget their future. Deepening to become so intense that their focus narrowed to only each other, as it did more often than either would admit.

“An — a — kin,” she groaned into his mouth.

His tongue slipped over hers, quietening her to soft mumbles of pleasure.

In a moment of clarity she heard one of the twins cry out and pulled back, letting his head sink to her shoulder with a quiet sigh.

“We will before we get back,” she whispered.

Sinking into his neck she placed a series of the tiniest kisses, placating him for the break that was to come. And trying to satisfy her own hunger.

“We’d better see to Leia,” he whispered, obviously distracted by Padmé’s arousing actions.

She didn’t even stop to marvel that he could now tell which twin was which from the other room. Before she could get too carried away she simply stood and left him to wait for her.

At the doorway from the cockpit though, she paused. Without turning back to him she quietly assured

“If they fuss all the way we’ll revert to realspace just before we reach the system. However we do it, I am going to love you until you can’t walk.”

And with that promise, she left him to try and calm himself.

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

Only Padmé emerged from their bedroom when the klaxon rang out. It was her hands alone that guided the ship the rest of the distance to Coruscant. The crack pilot remained miserably curled up in his bed. Refusing to believe they were truly here.

The city planet loomed in front of her. But she didn't feel the dread Anakin almost exuded. Instead she saw hope. Promise. The beginning of the reclamation of the Republic.

Anakin didn't even join her as she touched her ship down to its assigned landing platform.

With Leia and Luke still asleep Padmé slipped back into their bedroom. Her heart heavy. The sight of Anakin didn't help any. Stretched out on the bed with his hand thrown over his eyes. Her throat clogged, denying her breath as tears well. If broken-hearted had an image, that would be it. But even worse, tomorrow he wouldn't be here to look broken-hearted. He wouldn't be here at all.

"We're here," she informed.

He didn't move a single muscle. His fingers didn't twitch, his mouth didn't move. He just lay there in silence for a long time, while she stood anxiously at the door. Waiting for some, any kind of reaction.

"Anakin you can't put this off forever," she finally prompted softly.

The reality of what was happening started to slowly sink in as he lay there. Anakin was leaving. His smitten gaze wouldn't be there when she turned around. His soft words wouldn't voice an opinion when she asked for it. No hands would snake around her waist from behind when she was mixing a morning drink.

No more playing by the water or lazy days in bed. No trips to quaint villages, no picnics in the meadows. No enthusiastic husband waiting in her bed at night. Just the impossible task of trying to repair a Republic which had been under constant attack her entire lifetime.

It was a sad realisation indeed to know she'd chosen the wellbeing of thousands of star systems over the happiness of Anakin. The man whose very soul completed her own. Her heart clenched. No Ani. Life in the next few months loomed empty in her future.

He suddenly threw off his arm and sat up. Almost angry. Startling her with the abrupt break in the silence.

"Fine, I'll carry Luke," he spat.

Before she could say anything he'd stormed next door into the room Luke and Leia were sleeping in.

Padmé remained leaning against the door, looking at their now empty bed. It seemed an ominous premonition of the future. For so long their bed had been the only space they could

share together uninhibited. Where no one could interrupt or question the way they looked at each other. Now he wouldn't even be in their private haven. Not if he wished to minimise suspicion.

Her eyes closed sadly. No one would ever know the size of the sacrifice they were both making. Trying to shake it off she turned and followed after Anakin's banging footsteps.

As she rounded the corner into Leia and Luke's room she pulled up short and her heart fell. He was kneeling on the floor. Like he couldn't even support his own weight anymore. Like the knowledge of what was coming crushed him.

It ached to see Anakin so broken. This was not the strong Jedi knight who'd left her so many times for far flung war zones. For a brief moment she shifted her gaze to where Anakin's hand stroked Leia's head. Was this even the same man who had spent four years away from her? He'd always been reluctant to go but never so adamant that it wasn't going to happen.

She couldn't stand so far away from him like this. He was falling apart and he was her husband. It was physically impossible to stay away from him. Her feet moved instinctively until she was standing behind him. Her hands reached up lovingly. Even from behind she cupped his chin in her palms. Allowed her fingers to spread out and curve the strong lines of his jaw. Trying to offer some sort of comfort, familiarity. To squeeze in as much contact as possible before he left.

His head dropped down to his chest briefly. Reached up with one hand and stroked her soft fingers. The touch whispering over her skin almost saying 'I'm not mad at you'.

She forced herself not to cry. Leaning forward she pressed her lips into Anakin's hair. A lingering kiss while she inhaled the scent of his hair. It would be a long time before she had another opportunity to do so.

That's when she spoke the hardest truth of all.

"You shouldn't come home with us, it will be harder to leave."

You won't be able to drag yourself away. And it will raise more suspicion she silently added.

Her words voiced both their thoughts but it obviously hurt for Anakin to hear them. Her heart called out to him as his shoulders slumped further and his eyes fell away from the twins to his own knees.

Even touching him with her hands wasn't close enough while he was in so much pain. She carefully knelt beside him, her eyes intent on his shattered features. A warm and loving hand rose to brush back unruly blond locks.

"Now that we're here, I wish this day hadn't come," she confessed. "I feel we could have lived by the lake forever."

Anakin suddenly turned to her. Eyes full of determined passion.

"Then lets go back! And never return here again! We'll take the twins and spend every moment together and just be happy," the very young man idealised.

The look in Padmé's eyes vetoed his idea before she even opened her mouth to do it.

"I can't ignore the interests of Naboo. It's my job, and it makes me happy Ani," her voice soothed.

He couldn't accept that though. He couldn't accept that for them to be happy they had to be apart.

"I'll make you happy," he tried to coax.

In his mind he conjured up a picture of the life they would lead. Snuggling under thick blankets near the fire in winter. Walking the tracks in the tall forests, swimming in the lake in summer. And the whole time he would be there for her, kissing her and loving her and sharing her life.

"I've dedicated my whole life to Naboo's continued peaceful existence. What if Palpatine was able to return to power, and decided to attack his home planet? The lake wouldn't be a very safe place to be then."

With an air of reality already beginning to permeate the cabin, Padmé tried a different tack. One that didn't focus on the loss of everything he loved. Instead, on the life he would be regaining.

"Don't you want to be a Jedi?" she asked with just the slightest hint of mirth.

That gave him just enough pause. She rubbed her hands over his forearms lovingly. She didn't know what she did to him when she touched him so. His whole awareness converged around where her fingers made contact, and forced his attention to her. She stared intently at him until he was caught up in her gaze.

"I don't want the twins growing up with the threat of Palpatine hanging over them. What if they're Jedi?"

His chin turned away, not wanting to meet her eyes. He hadn't thought of that. He would most like to take his young family and just be with them. The twins as grown ups he hadn't thought about. And they would be Jedi. Both Leia and Luke responded to his gentle force promptings with a strength they'd obviously inherited from him. Stronger than any youngling he'd ever met.

Even as he avoided her gaze, she followed him.

"What if they grow up and there is still a Sith Lord alive that would kill them without a second thought? Or tries to turn them — he's been trying to get you after all."

There was a tight clamping across his chest. Kill Luke or Leia. No. He wouldn't let it happen. He was only twenty-four and already he'd come across three Sith. And Palpatine had probably had him pinned as the fourth. The thought that his children would even know what a Sith was in their lifetime, frightened him.

"Could you live with yourself, knowing that you could have removed him before they could even walk? Because I can't live with myself knowing that I abandoned the less

fortunate and persecuted peoples of the Republic. We can help remove the threat, Hero with no Fear.”

Anakin gave a sad sigh. She was right. She was always right. Fear would start to eat away at him if he left Palpatine alive. Leia and Luke would be on the Sith’s radar if he ever found out about them, and he couldn’t allow that. He couldn’t be happy with such a threat hanging over the two most precious lives he had created with Padmé.

There was a long pause of complete silence while she waited for him to respond. Finally

“Are you sure you don’t want to negotiate a peaceful settlement?” he grumbled.

The mocking in his tone brought a smile to her face.

“Sith Lords are your speciality. Do you think he would come to the bargaining table?”

Anakin laughed at her quip. Well and truly laughed. He loved her — oh how he loved her. He turned his head and captured her hand to his mouth. Flicked his tongue into her palm. It was a little salty and perfectly smooth.

“I’d feel selfish for keeping you to myself. We *will* see each other Anakin. I know you will ensure it. Even if you have to stay away for a little while so you don’t raise suspicions, I know you will come back to me.”

He nodded and turned away from her. All had been right in his universe for such a long time that he’d forgotten what it was like to have it all fall apart. What this feeling was. Before he could lose himself, he was clambering to his feet once more. He had to do this now. While she had him convinced it was the right thing to do. If he didn’t he might start to think of the reasons he didn’t want to leave again, and then he may never go back.

His cloak flew into his hand from a peg on the wall, and he shrugged it on.

“I should go. This will only get harder.”

He looked down into the warm fluffy blankets that had encompassed their younglings on their first flight. With an aching heart but a sense of purpose he reached out and ran his live fingertips over first Luke, then Leia’s forehead.

“I love you,” he told them quietly. “You mean the world to me, and I will see you very very soon.”

He cupped Luke’s tiny cheek and sighed.

“Don’t forget about me,” he pleaded to his sleeping twins in a cracking voice.

Then he pulled away. Gave Padmé the deepest kiss he had ever bestowed on her. Wrapped her up in his arms and cloak. Desperately invaded her mouth. Ran his fingers over her hair, her cheeks, the soft folds of her dress. Sunk deep into her and slowly opened himself up fully to the force, as had once been daily routine. Felt it light up and sizzle. Felt like he was disappearing into Padmé.

Then had to pull away.

“I’ll see you soon,” he promised her quietly. “Nothing will keep me away.”

Without another word he turned and walked away. An unseen tear slipping down his cheek as he abandoned everything he loved in the name of duty. But a sense of purpose filling his soul.

Padmé turned but didn't move her feet as Anakin left the room. Her ears perked, straining to hear Anakin's footsteps as he travelled the short corridor and disembarked. His boots were already lightening to the soft footfalls that had brought him up the steps from the balcony and into her bedroom so many nights without alerting her.

With a sad grin she listened to R2 trundling in behind her with a bubbling query. When had it happened that she'd been around this little droid long enough to not only understand the bulk of his beeping, but the intricate emotional undertones as well?

"Yes R2, go with him, and please take care of him for me."

She tried to hold her smile steady. With a spinning dome and a body to follow, the rolling of wheels followed Anakin's footsteps from the ship.

For some reason Threepio, who was often hot on R2s trail, stayed away. And the small room fell quiet.

Leaving her with two very special people as her only company. She looked down at them. Luke had his head turned to the cheek Anakin had been touching. Leia's nose was scrunched up as if itchy. All in all the embodiment of innocence that they would protect with everything they had. Her lips couldn't help curling up at them.

"You're so sweet," she whispered to the pair.

She leant down and touched her lips to Leia's forehead. Then Luke's.

They didn't wake though. She remained by their bedside, tucking up their blankets and stroking her hands over their tiny faces for a minute more. The idea that she would now be their only carer was daunting. Anakin had thrown himself into fatherhood, and was so attuned to them that he often pre-empted their cries. In their single month of life the twins had barely complained.

Now that he was gone, she held no illusions. Life wouldn't be nearly so pleasant.

In fact, she was probably wasting their good graces now. There were a lot of things to gather up and it would be easier to move around the ship while the twins were still asleep.

She stepped out into the hallway and was about to open the storage locker when her eyes inevitably turned to the lowered ramp. Berating herself for being ridiculous even as she did it, Padmé kneeled down and peered out. The platform was empty. Anakin and R2 had already boarded a shuttle and left.

"Mistress Padmé!" Threepio's voice called out loudly.

It interrupted her right before she was about to start wallowing in her own self-pity. And she couldn't be more thankful to the droid. Smiling at his over-enthusiasm she delicately

reached over and pushed the door panel, closing off the twins from the noise of her loyal droid.

“Yes Threepio?” she asked pleasantly as he waddled out into the hallway.

“Captain Typho has connected to the communicator and requests your attendance.”

Nodding she followed him back to the cockpit.

Captain Typho. Security, handmaidens, entertaining dignitaries: for so long that had been her life. Of course, a tall Jedi silently slipping into her bedroom at night had become part of what made that life so wonderful. As she moved behind her golden protocol friend she silently thanked Anakin in her heart. Because the life her mother and sister had always wished for her she had never even been able to imagine. She had always thought she would be bored by such an existence and had silently dismissed their pleas. And now she had lived that way with the most special person in her life for a third of a standard year.

As wonderful as it had been, she knew she couldn't live like that always though. Her heart had enjoyed the unequalled love she had been surrounded by but her mind needed more stimulation. And here it was in the form of Captain Typho's tiny figure standing disapprovingly over her holoprojector.

“M'lady,” he bowed stiffly.

Had she been alone with Anakin she would have giggled. But the woman who allowed herself to be freer in the presence of the Jedi Hero was now replaced by the woman who had spent her whole life deep in diplomacy. Instead she sat in the pilot's chair and faced him directly.

“We have much to speak of Captain, but I feel it would be prudent to conduct such a meeting in my quarters, and not over a Coruscant com channel.”

He nodded in agreement. Oh, Typho was silent. That spoke more of his mood, his anger, than any words could.

“I know where you are. Wait and I will escort you.”

Padmé wasn't surprised that he knew where she was. Her departure from Naboo, although low key, had been done using her priority exit vector. The very request would have been brought to the attention of anyone waiting for her to re-emerge. And it would have warned that she was returning to Coruscant. The security chief had obviously been monitoring for her clearance code on the capital world.

“Bring Dormé,” was her only response.

The captain bowed and disappeared.

She closed the connection. Leaned her elbows onto the control panel, and settled her chin into her hands.

“Well already one person knows,” she murmured to herself.

“Excuse me Miss Padmé, but I don't understand,” Threepio's voice interrupted.

She forced a smile for her droid, her only company. Suddenly she wished Anakin had stayed just a little longer. That they had discussed exactly who was going to find out about the twins. Because her parents discovering them had been unexpected, and a little unwelcome. There was a silent want between the two of them to keep their children just as hidden as their relationship. But realistically it couldn't be that way.

A full-grown Jedi Knight was stealthy and slipped in and out of her bedroom like a shadow. He was an expert at avoiding her staff. Even if he was in her apartment a little more than was entirely appropriate, they were careful to never display affection in front of anyone else. They couldn't stop people from having their suspicions, but they could do their best not to confirm them.

A full-grown Jedi Knight's tiny newborn children did not have such skills. They had no concept of hiding to protect the reputations of their parents. Even if she hid them away they would inevitably cry, draw attention. And truthfully she had no intention of subjecting them to such a life.

She quickly started forming a list in her mind. Some of her staff she trusted to be discreet. Those who had changed their routines so they didn't run into Anakin. Dormé, for instance, who now signalled Padmé's com half an hour before she came to wake her in the mornings, giving just enough time for any sleeping husband to wake and make love to his wife then slip out unseen. Ellé, who put all her clothes back into their draws and onto their hangers, except her nightgowns which were now left in a pile on the corner of her bed, denying the handmaiden's eyes the sight of Anakin's neatly folded sleep pants amongst her nightwear. Captain Typho, who never asked why the cameras in her bedroom were no longer connected, or why a Jedi Knight could be found in her living room so very often when he wasn't informed of any danger.

There were also some people she most definitely did not have faith in. Who she suspected to have leaked information to the media, or whose loyalty was questionable. Moteé, for instance, often let her eyes linger on Anakin's taut form, then seemed to direct daggers in Padmé's direction when the handsome blond only had eyes for his Senator. Or Finn, one of the younger security officers, who had once asked persistently as they hurried through the crowded Senate halls why Jedi Skywalker seemed to be in her apartment "so early in the mornings." Even worse was her ex-senatorial aide she still couldn't bare to think about, who had betrayed her trust and suggested to a press droid that staking out her apartment would show an unknown man was coming and going more than even the staff who lived with her.

None of those people would she ever allow to find out about Leia and Luke. Especially as her personal staff was about to increase. She would have to start thinking about bringing people in to care for the sweet little pair while she was out during the day.

Threepio made a klinking noise as he stood beside her, waiting.

"I'm sorry Threepio. Anakin and I would prefer that most people do not know Luke and Leia exist. I'm just trying to think of who I would be able to trust."

"Oh you can trust me Miss Padmé!" he eagerly declared.

She grinned at his innocent enthusiasm.

"I know I can. Thank you Threepio."

Padmé's eyes fell on one of the three witnesses to her beautiful wedding. Despite his over-enthusiasm and complete inappropriateness, Threepio was probably more discreet than his master and mistress. Even she couldn't help the way she risked exposure to greet Anakin when he returned from long missions.

"We should collect the bags together before Captain Typho arrives and Leia or Luke wake up. Could you help me?" she invited.

"Of course Miss Padmé!" he chirped.

He followed her as she made for the storage closet once more.

"You put these together, I'm going to get the twins ready."

She trusted Threepio's competence enough to leave him alone with the luggage. On her own, already missing Anakin by her side or trailing behind her, she moved back in to Leia and Luke's room. They were still fast asleep, and it wouldn't be long before they were jostled from the comfortable position Anakin had settled them in.

Unable to help herself, Padmé reached out to adjust Luke's little beanie. Making sure both he and his sister kept warm.

It was far too soon when she heard the soft, familiar "M'lady?" of Dormé approaching up the landing ramp. Taking a deep breath she back peddled a few steps and stuck her head outside the door.

"In here," she said softly, her eyes enticing her long-time friend into the room.

Dormé came in, her features full of questions. Padmé answered them all with a hopeful smile and a quiet introduction of

"Meet Leia and Luke."

Anakin stepped between the open doors of the shuttle. Forcing himself to keep his eyes and feet pointed straight ahead, so he would not look back.

The doors didn't close immediately behind him and the shuttle remained still. Fate was tempting him. Worry for Padmé, for his young family, whipped his head automatically, no matter how much he wanted to keep his eyes away.

R2 trundled in behind, tooting happily.

His gaze drifted up to the sleek ship. Two doors slammed together right in front of him, almost prophesising. The shuttle immediately started moving but his eyes remained locked on the reflective metal. No more Padmé, no more twins. Sadly he forced himself to stop looking. Try and stop thinking about them. They filled his thoughts so completely that his consciousness registered little else. This wasn't the frame of mind to greet Jedi. And that was exactly what he would be doing very soon.

Luckily his wedding present started beeping impatiently to get his attention.

Grinning at the tone that indicated his small friend was annoyed at being ignored, Anakin turned his eyes down.

“We’re going back to the Jedi temple,” he told the astromech in a hushed tone.

He stretched out with his awareness to try and feel the twins. Their presences were rapidly fading away as the shuttle rushed through Coruscant’s traffic. Just before he lost the ability to reach them he brushed against each of their minds with a gentle reminder that he loved them. Then they were gone and his heart was dropping.

Again R2 prevented the agony he knew was coming once the separation truly sunk in.

There was a series of hurried beeps and whoops and a long *whrooop* which brought forth an unstoppable splutter of laughter from Anakin.

“Four whole months, yes I’d say there *is* a new and better fighter on the market. We’re going to need a new one, the last was lost on the Invisible Hand,” he reminded his faithful friend.

He imagined marching straight to the docking bay and demanding a new fighter from the deck officer. In his imagination Masters Yoda, Windu and Obi-Wan appeared behind the deck officer. Obi-Wan’s arms were folded across his chest disapprovingly. Windu was frowning as always. And Yoda just peered at him like he was crazy. Perhaps a new fighter shouldn’t be his first request once he returned.

“If they let us have one,” he muttered to himself.

Then his mind swept back to the rescue of the Chancellor without his wanting it to. He remembered Palpatine prompting him to kill Dooku. His own apprentice. Palpatine had been such a good friend, a mentor to him. Now Anakin looked back on that friendship with nothing more than sadness. He knew that if he really wanted he could deny what he felt in the force and cling to a degree of doubt that Palpatine was the Sith Lord. But in his heart he knew. Palpatine *no*, *Sidious* his mind corrected, had used him. Anakin shook his head in disgust, and vowed to himself that the last Sith would be dead before the twins reached their first year.

Unlike his hatred for Dooku though, Anakin identified his need to see his long time counsellor gone as not revenge for betrayal of himself. That’s what Dooku had been, revenge. Palpatine needed to be dead, because Anakin knew the Sith disease would threaten the precious princess and prince he had just left behind in the care of his love. And it was his job to protect them all.

For the first time in his life Anakin took comfort in the prophecy that proclaimed he was the chosen one who would bring balance to the force. He would do it. To ensure Luke and Leia never struggled as he had, he would balance the force by destroying the man who fed the darkness. And if Sidious had taken on another apprentice, then it too would have to be weeded out.

To do that he needed the Jedi’s support. The shuttle glided to a stop, setting down about a kilometre from the Temple.

I need time to think about this he reasoned, and disembarked.

R2 followed patiently as Anakin began striding towards the spires he could already see straining up high into the sky. Moving amongst other beings again was an odd experience. He had to reduce his connection to the force. Stop listening like he had when he was waiting for the twins to cry out.

The twins. How did he justify months spent waiting for Padmé, who had been so beautifully pregnant, to give birth to what had turned out to be their twins? Leaving the Order without a word. Not even to his closest friend. No warning, no leave given, no way to contact him, just taking off.

It had felt right at the time. Then he'd known he had to get away from Coruscant as soon as possible, or face consequences he didn't trust himself to deal with. Considering Palpatine's betrayal he was totally sure he had made the right decision. Now he only had to convince the council of that.

If they'd even listen to him.

He started running through options in his head. It didn't take long to come up with an entirely plausible explanation. That he had sensed Palpatine's attempts on the Republic even though he didn't understand the feeling of impending doom. That was true after all. He could tell the council that he felt he was unprepared for the confrontation — considering the darkness he'd identified and slowly expelled from himself once the contrast of being with Padmé had illuminated just how unhappy and conflicted he'd been, that too was indeed very true.

Obi-Wan would no doubt press him as to why take Padmé. And the answer of "I love her" would probably not suffice in such a situation. His mind drifted to her position in the Senate. She was the leader of the loyalist committee, the public face of the petition of two thousand, had been one of the few who was not afraid to stand up and question Palpatine's grip on the Republic.

Could it really be such a stretch that he'd felt she was threatened too? A target? Never mind that she embodied every piece of happiness he could ever hope to hold. No, as far as the Jedi council were concerned, he'd thought her vulnerable — at a stretch it was actually true, she was in a vulnerable state pregnant with his children but that need not be mentioned.

Only her political standing mattered, and that was all the council would know about.

Far too quickly his steps had come to a halt and the imposing façade of the grand Jedi temple loomed high in front of him.

"Well, here we are R2," he told the droid unnecessarily.

Tactfully R2 didn't make a single peep in reply.

Anakin took a deep breath and allowed thoughts of his family to fill his mind completely one last and final time. Padmé whispering into his ear that she would always love him. Her eyes locked to his as she stroked her fingers down his face right before she would kiss him. Luke's wide-eyed wonder when he commanded Anakin's attention all to himself in the middle of the night. Leia's delighted squeals as she reached out for him to hold her, the way her tiny head filled his hand as he held her up against his shoulder.

Then he buried all that love and wonder deep in his heart, where no one else could sense it. And without further pause, started up the stairs two at a time. He reached the top, the grand entrance and stopped.

Obi-Wan stood with his arms folded calmly across his chest. The Jedi master didn't say a single word. Didn't move, emitted no feelings into the force.

Just stared at his only apprentice. And raised a single eyebrow.

Dormé looked at the bassinet in disbelief. Padmé had already turned to sling a bag of the twins' belongings over her shoulder.

When she turned back, it was to the sound of footsteps. Typho abruptly pulled up. Stared at the sleeping babies incredulously.

"I don't know how this is going to work out, so I'd appreciate your discretion," she half-whispered to the pair of them.

Typho was gaping, his eyes switching back and forth from the Senator to her children and back again. But Dormé reminded Padmé why she had always been such a good friend.

With a slowly appearing, but bright smile, the handmaiden moved to the cot and leant in.

"May I?" she asked in her gentle lilt.

Padmé pulled up and looked at her friend in surprise. Flabbergasted, she could do nothing more than nod. Dormé picked Leia up just as the little girl was yawning awake.

"Well hello," she grinned, quietly taking a handful of little fingers that stretched out. "Oh Padmé she's beautiful. Leia, did you say?"

Padmé transferred her body weight to her other foot.

"Leia," she confirmed with a quiet, proud and somewhat shy smile.

"Leia," Dormé repeated.

The quiet banter between the women seemed to bring Typho back to his senses.

"We obviously have much to discuss, but I think we should move somewhere more secure. Might I suggest we return to your apartment," he tactfully interrupted.

"Yes," Padmé immediately concurred.

The Senator was back. For a moment she was the mother too, leaning down and taking Luke up into her arms. Making sure to keep him asleep, and enjoying as he sighed a little and nuzzled into her. But the moment was very short-lived, before she was her no-nonsense and practical self once again.

Typho stepped back and allowed Padmé to lead the way.

"Threepio," she called the droid.

A golden frame weighed down with her bags shuffled out into the hallway. Typho took one and then followed quickly after Padmé and Dormé onto the landing platform.

When Threepio was the last to exit the Naboo cruiser Padmé pushed buttons in a sequence to close the ramp and lock the ship.

It clicked into place with a thump of finality. She watched the closed door for a moment. Life with Anakin, over.

Shaking herself from the barely fleeting melancholy thought she moved quickly across the open and windy platform. Pulling Luke's blanket up to protect him from the cold gusts. The movement over his face seemed to wake him anyway. Either that or the lurch of the private shuttle as it started to escort them back to her apartment.

Unlike his sister, Luke was not pleased to be woken. Padmé sunk back into a seat, grateful to be off her feet.

"Shhhh, it's alright, it's ok. Shhh, Lukie," she soothed her son as he worked up from whimpers to outright cries.

He seemed to settle a little with the sound of her voice. Not much though.

She started doing quick calculations in her head, ignorant of her two friends sharing disbelieving looks. With a grin Padmé leaned down into the bag at her side.

"You hungry, Prince Luke?"

Whether it was the fact that she used Anakin's term of endearment, or that Luke caught sight of the milk she was readying, their son did calm down. As soon as the top was in his mouth he was silent, sucking away hungrily.

She looked up once Luke was settled. Not afraid to face the questioning eyes of both Typho and Dormé. Not one of the adults said a word.

Padmé grinned to herself and looked down, a sudden funny thought popping into her mind. She had her own Jedi Council right here to face, full of accusations and repercussions. She and Anakin were more alike in their returns to Coruscant than they'd considered.

"We're here," Dormé noted unnecessarily.

The craft was pulling to a stop. Padmé quickly disembarked and hurried to the turbolift, Threepio running after her and Dormé as Typho lingered behind to bark orders at his men.

He then hurried to join them but Padmé stopped him right before the door to the lift closed.

"Is the apartment empty?" she questioned.

Her meaning didn't seem to be lost on him, loose-tongued employees had unfortunately been a problem before. He paused and grabbed his com to murmur for someone to please leave. They waited a moment, then the doors shut and the carriage started lifting. The enclosed space was uncomfortably quiet. Luke was still drinking, and the sound of his sucking was all that could be heard. Typho stood stiffly facing the door, Padmé and Dormé behind, each focusing their attention on the babes in their arms.

"Give me a moment," Padmé requested as she stepped into her apartment.

She headed to her bedroom, surveying the perfect space that had served both her and her husband so completely. Her eyes drifted to the window. It had occurred to her while Anakin slept restlessly on her chest in the ship that while the lakeside retreat had seen Anakin create the most beautiful nursery for their twins, the apartment had no such room for Leia and Luke.

Luke finished his bottle and responded to the pats on his back while Padmé surveyed her private space. She took up a datapad and begun a list using only her free hand. The room that had seen her love Anakin countless times over the course of their short marriage was going to have to accommodate their children too before night fell over the megatropolis.

Threepio moved in with all her bags, carrying them to her wardrobe.

"I need for you to buy all the items on this list for me," she requested, holding out the pad.

He took it from her, glanced down, then nodded his head with an "Of course Miss Padmé. Shall I go now?"

"Yes, thank you Threepio."

His steps clanked even on the carpeted floor until he was gone.

Then she emerged back into the living room where Typho stared blankly out the window and Dormé sat teasing Leia on the divan.

Both immediately turned to the sound of her rustling skirts.

Padmé took a very deep breath to steady herself, then strode with all the confidence she had to face the most trusted of all her employees. The question was — how far should her explanation go?

Anakin felt his palms begin sweating at the very sight of the great Negotiator standing there. Just waiting for him.

His mind came up with a thousand ways to try and handle this situation. He could start rattling off his explanation now — just launch right into it. Or he could push past and say nothing, act very self-righteous and never given an explanation at all. Or he could wait for Obi-Wan to speak first and just react as accusations were hurled at him. Even more alternatives started presenting themselves as he stood in front of the man he'd once spent every day with.

At last he chose what perhaps wasn't the best option, but was the one that jumped up and down the loudest in his mind. Act as normal as possible and pretend nothing had happened.

"Obi-Wan," he bowed his head with just enough respect to look like he meant it.

Bluff that he hadn't lied and snuck out of the temple like a disobedient Padawan, then disappeared for months without any justification.

When he raised his eyes back up from his bow, Obi-Wan's eyebrow seemed to rise even higher. And not a single other muscle moved, not even a hair on his beard as a short gust of wind blew past.

They stared at one another in silence. Anakin's hands began twitching nervously at his sides. He felt like Obi-Wan could see right through him.

Behind him he heard R2 clunking up the last steps until finally he rolled up to Anakin's side and stopped with an abrupt jerk.

Slowly Obi-Wan turned his eyes downward to the droid. Like he wasn't surprised that Anakin had taken R2 with him when he disappeared. Anakin could almost hear the accusatory tone as the speech on attachment to insignificant items such as droids began in his mind, just as Obi-Wan liked to deliver it. But without a sound, Jedi Master Kenobi's eyes simply lifted back up to the Knight.

Traffic sped by noisily overhead. Beings hustled along conversing in a hundred languages in the wide courtyard below. But Obi-Wan faced down Anakin without a sound. Without movement. And in ten years as his Padawan, Anakin had never felt that a dressing down — an *explosion* — from Obi-Wan was more imminent than it was now.

But as always the Jedi Master surprised him. He looked Anakin directly in the eye. Then headed towards him.

Anakin's hand immediately fell to his belt. A natural reaction ingrained into him when he felt threatened. The weight of his lightsaber hilt pushed against his thigh but never detached from its holder.

Obi-Wan kept right on walking past Anakin and started moving down the steps. The picture of Jedi calm as he walked away.

There was a moment where Obi-Wan stopped. His head didn't turn back to Anakin, but Anakin's had turned to watch him.

"If you intend to explain yourself, I suggest you follow," came the cool order.

Obi-Wan began walking down the steps again and Anakin watched after him, conflicted. To follow Obi-Wan would be to suffer the most intense scrutiny he would face. He wasn't sure he was ready for that yet. To move into the temple would be to admit that he had done something wrong. That he had a cover story he needed to work on.

Briefly closing his eyes Anakin drew on all the strength the force could offer him.

"Come on R2," he decided.

Jogging to catch up as Obi-Wan moved steadily away from the Jedi Temple. It didn't take long for their destination to become clear. Anakin walked in silence at Obi-Wan's side as Dex's diner loomed in the distance. He tried to cheer himself up with the thought that at least he could get a big meal he didn't have to cook himself, it had been a long time since that had happened. Somehow it didn't bring him the comfort he thought it would.

Because it just reminded him that cooking for Padmé often involved her arms and kisses and thanks as the smells of preparation approaching completion enticed her into the kitchen. And he had to work extra hard to not only fight off the memory, but suppress the feelings of love and loss that surfaced along with it.

He couldn't think about Padmé now. It would only get him in more trouble.

For some reason he hoped the diner was full. Then maybe he'd be able to talk softly, mumble even, and Obi-Wan would only partly hear him and he'd get off scot-free. When he stepped through the doorway after Obi-Wan it was clear he was going to have no such luck.

Two dugs whispering in a corner booth and that was it. No one else. Obi-Wan was going to be able to hear him just fine. Scowling at the force and its sense of irony, Anakin followed Obi-Wan who calmly settled himself in a booth.

Gave the waitress droid an order as he folded his arms on the table. Then bored his gaze straight into Anakin and didn't move.

The statue act was starting to get on Anakin's nerves. He was no longer Obi-Wan's Padawan. He was an accomplished Knight. He'd led armies, rescued Chancellors. And whether he'd been in the best frame of mind or not he *had* defeated a Sith Lord. He didn't deserve to be treated like this.

"What?" he finally snapped.

His eyes darkened and his brows sunk deep into the crease at his nose. Accusing Obi-Wan with almost as much as Obi-Wan seemed to be accusing him with silence.

In response to his outburst Obi-Wan simply lifted that eyebrow back up. Kept it there so long that Anakin turned his gaze away to stare towards the kitchen and silently hurry their food along. Anything to break the tension.

When he eventually turned back Obi-Wan seemed to now be glaring at him. He decided that perhaps the best thing would be to skirt the issue and try to talk to Obi-Wan his friend before he began explaining himself to Obi-Wan the Jedi Master.

"So," he let the beginning of a sentence drift off into nothing.

Did Obi-Wan's glare just become more intense?

They needed some neutral ground. A common enemy. The idea leapt into Anakin's mind all too quickly. It was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

"Is there any intelligence on Palpatine's whereabouts?" he eagerly inquired.

"Perhaps he has engaged the company of a Senator and disappeared to Naboo," Obi-Wan replied fluidly in the most politely innocent tone ever to have passed through his cultured lips.

Ouch. He knows Anakin winced internally.

Somehow he had been hoping that Obi-Wan, and in fact the Jedi Order in general, were ignorant of his whereabouts the past few months. Apparently not.

"Oh," was all Anakin could reply.

"Yes, 'Oh'."

Anakin's mind began grasping desperately for something, anything to say. But eventually he was left with nothing and had to concede to his superior.

"How much do you know?" he sighed reluctantly.

With a hint of defeat in his tone, Obi-Wan seemed to relax in front of him.

“Four and a half months ago you deliberately misled me, snuck out of the Temple, collected Senator Amidala and left Coruscant. I tracked you to a palace up in Naboo’s lake country but not beyond.”

Anakin baulked briefly.

The lakehouse his mind screamed out. By what amazing act of generosity by the force did he not find us there?

“You’d obviously recently fled,” Obi-Wan observed.

As much as it annoyed him that the Jedi had specifically infiltrated the one place he wished them not to be — the private haven that had seen the arrival of his infinitely precious younglings — Obi-Wan’s revelation had the opposite effect to that intended on Anakin.

The Jedi Master obviously meant to let Anakin know that he had been partially discovered in a forbidden excursion. But to Anakin it actually affirmed that he had done the right thing. That his premonition — that *feeling* that they had to get away from Coruscant — was correct. If Obi-Wan had actually been able to track them all the way to their home, there was no luck involved that they hadn’t been there. Perhaps they’d been up in the meadows, or strolling together in their little village — whatever the reason the force had decreed that Anakin and Padmé were meant to be left alone. That time had been set aside for them to enjoy each other’s company, and not even the war’s most successful general could destroy that.

Anakin’s faith in the mystical energy field was growing by the second.

“I am sure you already understand a great deal of what has happened without me having to explain it to you,” she began.

Her two friends shared a quick glance and then turned back to her. Yes. They had inferred most of the story. But the looks on their faces made it obvious they wanted to know more. They felt the deserved everything, and although they would never say such a thing to Padmé, she could read it so clearly.

“Palpatine’s defection was partially foreseen.”

Dormé quietly gasped, tightening her hold on the youngest Skywalker. Even Typho seemed to momentarily harden at the mention of the ex-Chancellor.

“It was felt he may have been more of a threat than came to pass.”

She watched her handmaiden for any sign of scrutiny but only saw sadness. When she turned to the captain, however, the expression was quite different. It seemed as if he was just about to ask a question. Perhaps demand why he had no knowledge of a threat, or ask why he wasn’t informed, so he too could have protected her.

At that moment Luke made a soft murmuring noise and turned into Padmé’s warmth. And Typho seemed to understand. This assignment hadn’t just been about physical protection. The hidden pregnancy threw a whole other dimension of familial bonding into the scenario. A situation into which he would only be intruding.

The good captain simply nodded and Padmé had to breathe a small sigh of relief. She didn't want or need to give any more explanation. Her loyal protectors were both smart enough to fill in any blanks on quiet reflection, and not ask questions. And there were other matters to attend to.

"The Senate sits in two days to elect a temporary Chancellor and I intend to be there. I need to speak with a number of Senators before then. Representative Binks and I need to have a discussion before the day is out."

The to-do list in Padmé's head was growing longer and longer.

"Are all my staff still on Cosucant?"

"No m'lady," Dormé spoke up.

"They all need to be recalled immediately. Is my secretary?"

Captain Typho nodded, already pulling out his com and stepping away from them, hopefully to locate the young woman.

"And I'll need to contact the queen today."

Leia whimpered in Dormé's arms, interrupting her mother's increasingly busy scheduling.

The formal tone dropped from Padmé's voice and lightened considerably, all the weight of her position dropping away in an instant as she looked towards her newborn daughter.

"And then there's you two," she cooed softly, brushing her lips over Luke's forehead.

Her eyes drifted over her son lovingly, knowing immediately that she could never trust just anyone with their care. She would need help in the next few weeks until she could hire someone appropriate. Until then, she certainly couldn't force the job on any of her current staff.

"I'll feed Leia and then I'll put them down. Could you bring her into my bedroom for me, and then put through a call to my sister please Dormé?"

Padmé stood, already heading towards her bedroom with Luke protectively wrapped up in her arms. In that moment it struck her again that Anakin was no longer the active parent he had been for the past month. He wouldn't be here to care for the twins every needs. He wouldn't be here, coddling them so excessively with his barely restrained joy. Listening out for them when she was deeply immersed in the workings of the galactic republic. Now it was just her. And at that second she wanted nothing more than the soft comfort of his voice, and the tightness of his arms around her. To assure her that somehow, everything would be alright.

"Of course m'lady," the soft voice of her friend washed over her.

It brought her back to reality. First the twins had to go to sleep and then she would ask one of the few people she truly trusted to put everything down and come help her. And hopefully Sola would say yes, because Anakin was no longer an option.

Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

Gratefully Anakin shrunk back into his chair as his meal was delivered. He had absolutely no intention of telling Obi-Wan about the wonderful road his life had started down. And he needed to be absolutely sure of the details in the partial-story he was about to use. Hopefully it would be enough. To explain his absence and Padmé's involvement.

His heart started beating faster as he thought of her. Attending her office in the Senate once more as if nothing had changed. As if she hadn't produced the two most perfect beings in the galaxy just a short time ago. Hurriedly he tried to suppress the warmth that spread right into his fingertips. Now was not the time for contemplating the wonder of being in love. Now was the time for making sure he got every detail absolutely right.

He looked down at the assortment of colourful vegetables. Took a last moment to steel himself. Then met Obi-Wan's insinuating gaze head on.

"I sensed it," he said with a quiet confidence.

Whatever his friend had been expecting, that had not been it. The look on his face made that clear enough.

"I beg your pardon?"

"When we returned after Dooku's fall, I sensed Palpatine's betrayal. I didn't know what it was at the time, but I knew something was imminent."

Obi-Wan frowned, folding his hands into his cloak and leaning back. He obviously didn't have full confidence in Anakin's explanation.

"You are not one to pass up a challenge," he pointed out.

That is true Anakin noted. *But sometimes there are more important things to consider than simply my pride and sense of adventure.* As he acknowledged that to himself, he was once more taken aback by how much he'd changed. Grown. His thoughts flickered back to the tiny lights that rested in Padmé's sole care. All the hope and peace and tranquillity their innocence offered him. Knowing it was because of them that he had taken the time to remove himself from the Jedi, to mature in this way. He was no longer that cocky warrior who considered nothing but his own glory.

"You must have sensed something was wrong with me," Anakin prodded his friend.

The Master briefly looked down at his plate.

"You are often conflicted."

"I was drawing on the darkside," Anakin told him bluntly.

That was possibly the most shocking thing he could have said. But it was as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders as he finally admitted to it out loud. To Obi-Wan. Padmé had

already heard as much, but in true form had protected and cradled his heart, rather than censuring him. Obi-Wan would not carry the same emotional tentativeness. As he looked on his friend fell into silence, staring at him in disbelief.

Taking the silence as a good sign, he continued to steer the conversation away from the Padmé element of his disappearance. This was an important matter for Anakin as a Jedi. It needed to be discussed too.

“You weren’t,” Anakin paused and grinned slyly as he recalled, “conscious when I killed Dooku.”

Obi-Wan scowled in remembrance of his easy defeat. But his ex-apprentice wasn’t in the mood for dwelling on his triumphs today.

“I had him at my mercy, and I was terribly conflicted. The Chancellor instructed me to finish him, and in a moment of weakness I allowed him to direct me.”

Shaking his head in recollection Anakin pointed out “I was often conflicted. There were many incidents but that was a culmination of sorts. To make matters worse, the Chancellor was a great influence on me. I thought him a wise and capable leader, far more than I did the Jedi council. Can you imagine how I might have acted had he asked for my loyalty? Knowing what we do now? That he is a Sith?”

Anakin waited for a reaction from Obi-Wan. When it didn’t come immediately he simply left it at that and reached for his drink. Taking a sip, then digging into his meal. It was some time before the conversation started again, and he had already half-emptied his plate.

“That is a very frank admission to make about yourself,” Obi-Wan cautiously noted.

Nodding, the new father admitted “I’ve had much time to meditate on my actions.”

“And?”

“It was enlightening. I am not the man I was when I left Obi-Wan.”

He let himself think of his strengthened bond to the most important thing in his life. The tiny children they had gifted one another. The strong ties of love that joined all four of them together. His mind briefly retreated to their last visit up to the shaak grazing fields. Having his young bubbly offspring stretched out to enjoy the sun as he relaxed and enjoyed her serene company.

“I feel calmer, more at peace.”

The Council’s representative seemed to truly take to heart what he was saying, and for that Anakin was glad. There was only one final question he would have to face. Obi-Wan didn’t disappoint him.

“Why take the Senator?” he demanded.

Obi-Wan knew they were friends. If only he could tread lightly enough, this would all be entirely believable.

“The force sent me a warning of sorts. To leave Coruscant as quickly as possible — what I can retrospectively understand as a direction to remove my unsure self from the Chancellor’s

presence before he attempted his takeover. Can you imagine anyone more his opposite than her? She was necessary, I needed her to ground me, to remind me of what is right. Padmé was returning to Naboo for personal reasons anyway, and I felt I couldn't leave her here with Palpatine watching her so closely. Are you aware of some of the committees she was involved in, legitimately and otherwise? She was more of a target than me."

That seemed to all come out in a single breath. And it took Obi-Wan a long time to digest it. What followed were numerous questions. Anakin somehow managed to weave his way around them, hoping against hope that Obi-Wan would take his explanation and leave it at that. Their discussion turned towards a more Jedi-oriented path as the question of Padmé seemed to be settled. And there came the truly difficult admissions.

As evening fell over her quiet apartment Padmé reached out and thoughtfully turned off her holotransmitter. Sola and Darred would leave Naboo as soon as possible, she didn't know whether to be grateful or disappointed. Her sister would no doubt demand details to the partial story her parents knew about the twins. The senator's thoughts inevitably drifted to the major hole in her explanation. And what he might be doing right now.

The thought of light waves of hair falling across his smitten eyes flashed up before her. Beneath her robes her flesh crawled, almost as if his caress lingered along her bare skin. I love you she whispered to his image. She could almost see the corners of his lips curling up like they always did when she said those words. For a moment she simply sat. Wishing that perhaps they could have chosen to stay at the palace by the lake a little longer. That her handsome Jedi was still by her side. Her imagination drifted, allowing her to feel the wafting touch of his fingertips on the nape of her neck. And she mentally sighed, almost believing for a moment that she was sinking into his embrace. Feeling his face pushing into the curve of her shoulder like it was the safest of havens.

The cry of her newborn brought her back to her neat study. Her heart sunk with the reminder that he wasn't here. That this time, he wouldn't beat her to the cradle. With a pause she looked around her office, the stack of datapads reminding her of the causes that had tugged her back to Coruscant. A smile quirked on Padmé's lips at the irony of it all. Because she quickly hurried to her feet and swept out of her office, her steps dashing towards the little baby who only had to awaken to grab her attention.

"It's alright," she hushed as she entered their bedroom.

With all her effort she avoided looking at their bed. It could only remind her that when she slipped beneath the covers tonight, no hand would reach out begging for her touch. Instead she found a diluted version of Anakin's consuming gaze, a pair of clouded blue eyes whimpering for her attention.

"I'm here, I'm here," Padmé soothed.

Lovingly tender she carefully lifted Luke into her arms. She whispered soft sounds of reassurance, moving towards the open living room as Leia slept on. Luke's cries lessened until his tears had dried, and her attention was captivated. By the baby that stared up at her, fascinated.

She had a brief flash. Of Anakin's hand slipping around her when the birthing droid had first laid this tiny baby in her arms. Of being studied by matching pairs of curious blue eyes. Of a long kiss to her temple. Of metallic fingers reaching out to caress miniature youngling ones.

Their son studied her with all the quiet dependence of his father. And it brought tears flooding to her dark eyes. She wanted that firm chest pressed up to her back right now. His warm arms and deep, calm voice. Without Anakin, she didn't feel complete. Luke sighed and wriggled a little. He recaptured her attention. Enough to remind her of the changes her young Jedi knight had undergone. The emotional ruin he'd been when they last left this planet. The fulfilled devotion that fuelled Anakin's determination when they returned. Studying their tiny child she knew that this had been the reason Anakin was now content. This was the reason her life was now complete.

And she wouldn't let anything hurt him. With her only son in her arms Padmé returned to her study and tugged free a datapad. Her fingers flew, filing false birth records for Luke and Leia Amidala as she encrypted and then classified those of Luke and Leia Skywalker. If Anakin ever decided to reveal himself, it should be done on his own terms. She wouldn't deny him that.

'Record successfully filed' the screen flashed up as she finished.

Padmé gave her son a mischievous grin.

"I love you."

Luke didn't answer, and Padmé didn't need him to. He and his sister had fulfilled both their lives.

Anakin tried to remain calm as he repeated to the council the story he'd given Obi-Wan. That he had sensed a confrontation he could not survive approaching, and how he had acknowledged both his own use of the darkside and Palpatine's grooming of him whilst he'd been away, meditating in seclusion. That he'd taken the Senator from Naboo with him on the basis that, as an integral member of the loyalist committee he'd been sure she too would come under attack.

"The shadow of the dark side clouded everything," he softly concluded.

Then he just waited. He got a suspicious glare from Windu. An "Hmmm," from Yoda. But more than anything he got indecision. It was obvious they didn't know what to do with him. So he just stood silently.

"Accept this assignment you gave yourself lightly, we do not, Skywalker," Yoda finally decreed.

Anakin tried not to physically show his disappointment as he would have so many times before. Something as extreme as being kicked out of the Order wouldn't be the massive blow it once would have dealt him. Not now that he had so much more in his life than it could ever offer. But he still longed to help people as Padmé did. Taking such an active role in weeding out the scum in the universe was part of who he was. And more than anything, he needed to

know Palpatine was gone. He needed to do it himself — to achieve a sense of closure on such a tumultuous time in his life.

Then Master Windu blew him out of the water.

“However this council cannot ignore the positive results it seems to have yielded. You are correct in assuming the Senator would have become a target for Palpatine, we have uncovered evidence that she is among a small group who were to be executed at a moment’s notice when a certain order was issued.”

Anakin’s heart rate leapt exponentially on hearing that. Padmé. Palpatine had not only wanted him, he’d been willing to kill. Kill *Padmé*. Instead of blowing up in a fit of rage, of vowing revenge on the former Chancellor, one of his greatest mentors, Anakin once again acknowledged how much he was changed. Because all he felt was vindication. A trust, a thanks to the force that had warned him so many months ago to take the most precious thing he had and hide her away until it was safe. Instead of being assassinated she had the family she’d always wanted, instead of walking around waiting to be killed she’d spent the last four months walking around buying baby clothes. Yes, his trust in the force was total.

“And your own growth is obvious,” Obi-Wan noted from behind him.

Anakin’s head turned slightly, inclining his head with respect as his friend studied him intently. He could almost read the accusation in Obi-Wan’s eyes, that the story would be believable if only he hadn’t taken Padmé with him.

Anakin didn’t even squirm. He was not going to admit the full truth to Obi-Wan, no matter how many glares he got. At least his former mentor too could see how changed he was — how he had worked to rid himself of the darkside through peace and reflective meditation.

Focused on everything he loved and was pure in his life, not the worries of the Republic.

“Punish you this council will not.”

Anakin couldn’t hold back the small grin that slipped onto his face.

“But we suggest you do not pull such a stunt again,” Obi-Wan pushed.

It was obvious that Obi-Wan was a great deal more wary of Anakin’s motivations than anyone else in the room. Even Windu wasn’t emanating his usual distrust as much as Kenobi was.

Padmé was roused from her sleep for the fourth time that night. Exhausted she rolled to Anakin’s empty side of the bed and somehow managed to place her feet on the floor.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming,” she murmured, somehow righting herself so she could stand.

The awfully sweet pair of bassinets Threepio had managed to procure late in the afternoon were side by side next to her wardrobe. In the darkness she was standing right next to them and couldn’t quite decipher which twin was awake. Right at that moment she admired Anakin’s uncanny ability to just *know* from their cries if it was Luke or Leia.

Squinting she forced her eyes open.

“Shhhh, Leia,” she calmed.

With an incredibly tired smile she picked up her treasured tiny girl. This was the first night she'd been alone with them, and it was lonely. Even knowing something so small as when she went back to bed he'd be there waiting to hold her had been something to look forward to.

“It's coming, it's okay. Shhhh, mummy's here.”

Leia's whimpers started to lessen but the aching in Padmé's heart didn't. As she struggled to prop herself up with her pillows it was yet another reminder that the extra pair of eager hands he provided were missing. She rested back. Patiently watched her beloved child feeding, and tried not to be hyper-aware of what was missing. The way his head or his hand would come and rest on her thigh while she did this.

Closing her eyes she tipped her head back and murmured quietly into the ceiling “I miss you Anakin.”

For just a moment Leia pulled away and seemed to glance towards where her father should be sleeping beside them. Padmé watched her curiously, lifting an eyebrow as Leia's tiny features screwed up, then returned to her dinner. Holding out her little fingers and getting Padmé's free hand to hold onto.

“You miss daddy too,” she understood.

Grinning sadly she jiggled the little baby, trying to improve both their spirits.

“Hopefully he'll come home soon.”

The dim light of the city that fell through the windows was just enough to make out Leia's delicate features. Pale, perfect skin caressed by the soothing tones of one of her handmade baby blankets. Padmé's thoughts fluttered back to the woman in their small village, her shop full of interesting things. The way Anakin would hang nervously outside, the thoughts of impending fatherhood obviously weighing on his mind. With a small smile Padmé brushed her fingers very lightly over Leia's full cheeks. How a month and the arrival of this creature had changed him. Had changed her. Almost unconsciously she drew her only daughter in even closer. Two pairs of brown eyes met, and for a moment it was like the universe was in perfect balance. Despite the fact she was exhausted, and missed her husband, Padmé was truly happy. She had the child she'd dreamed of and then some, a man whose very existence made her feel complete. Even though Anakin wasn't here, the love he gave her, and the evidence of it, was. This incredibly fragile baby that could barely wrap her entire fist around a single finger.

“You're so precious,” she whispered.

Her soft lips found Leia's forehead. Almost simultaneously Leia was finally full and tugged away. Carefully Padmé tucked herself back into her nightgown and raised her daughter to her shoulder. There was a peaceful serenity that existed in her bedroom as she got to her feet and started pacing. The tiny head cradled delicately in her hand. A nuzzling motion from the baby enlivened her shoulder, seemingly saying that she never wanted to be out of Padmé's arms again.

She leaned her head next to Leia's ear and barely above a breath whispered, “I love you.” Leia didn't respond of course but Padmé gave her soft skin another kiss anyway.

The minute he entered his quarters Anakin knew he couldn't stay. Not even remaining longer than was necessary to have a shower.

He wanted to go home. More than anything, he wanted to take himself straight to the docking bay, settle himself into the first speeder he set eyes on and fly straight back to Padmé.

Unfortunately, he was being watched. It was subtle, unobtrusive, but he could feel the presence of an ever-constant stream of Padawans following him around. He could pretty much place money on which Jedi master had given them this assignment — Obi-Wan did not hide his disbelief very well, seeming determined to poke a hole in Anakin's story. And in this instance Anakin agreed with Padmé — returning home would only cause people to ask deeper questions. Would probably give Obi-Wan confirmation of what he suspected. No matter how much Anakin longed to have her pressed up against him, her soft body under his hands, her luscious lips caressing his.

Staying in his quarters by himself was not going to take his mind off that longing. Nor was it going to help in the capture of Palpatine, one of the main reasons he was back here.

Taking a deep breath he reached out and steadied himself against a table. The twins. How much he missed having those two cuddled in his arms, nuzzling into his chest when they were affectionately sleepy. His sweet little blue-eyed boy, his perfect little brown-eyed girl. His head felt slightly foggy as he remembered what it felt like to brush his fingers over their tiny little toes, even worse when it occurred to him that he'd not seen or touched any member of his family in almost eighteen hours.

Trying to shake it off, he knew he had to get out of there.

Focused on his goal, Anakin redressed and headed for the archives. Palpatine. He had to focus on destroying Palpatine so his innocent baby Jedi and Padmé — how long had it been since he kissed Padmé — would be safe. He had some studying to do.

Obi-Wan decided that Anakin's unexplained absence could not go on so. He had been fishing for further information but to no avail. If Anakin had been doing something improper, then the Jedi Council needed to know about it. The sooner the better.

His explanation was entirely plausible. And Obi-Wan had to give his friend credit, the account was wholly believable except for one major flaw. Senator Amidala. Any other Senator and he would have no trouble at all believing Anakin. But taking the woman who still quite clearly held Anakin's fascination well into his knighthood — no chance was Anakin's former master going to accept that.

Slipping his hands into his sleeves he left the Jedi temple with one goal in mind. Evening was just falling over the city planet. The senator would surely be in her apartment. And as an old friend, he felt no qualms about simply dropping by.

Whatever she and Anakin had been doing, the council needed to know. He needed to know. As the one who spent most of his time searching for the missing Jedi, he felt he deserved an explanation. And since Anakin couldn't be found in the temple this afternoon...

Shaking his head slightly, Obi-Wan boarded the transport with a heavy heart. He knew what he expected to find at the Senator's apartment. Anakin. He would soon have to start admitting to himself what he suspected

They are in a relationship. There. He'd formed the thought into words. Ironically, it was the senator, and not Anakin, who he expected to be rational and veto such an affair.

There was no challenge from her security team as he entered. His brows furrowed as he made his way to the turbo lift. Jedi not even questioned as they made for her apartment? Unfortunately, that only heightened his suspicions. He was able to waltz right up to her door.

He pressed the announcer. And had no idea of what awaited him.

The door slid open. Revealing a man he'd never seen with a child in his arms.

For a moment Obi-Wan almost took a step back. Perhaps he'd come out on the wrong floor.

"Hello," the man greeted.

A note of inquisition laced his tone. They both studied each other. It gave Obi-Wan a moment to assess the situation.

"My name is Obi-Wan Kenobi. I was looking for Senator Amidala," Obi-Wan revealed suspiciously.

He peered over the man's shoulder into the apartment. The familiar surroundings confirmed he was indeed outside the right apartment.

"Darred Naberrie," the man nodded, then suddenly squeezed his eyes shut like he'd made a big mistake. "Actually, pretend you didn't hear that. It's just Darred."

"I'm sorry?" Obi-Wan was incredibly confused by the man's introduction.

Naberrie. That was a name he'd heard before. Padmé's parents had that name.

"You're a Jedi?"

Obi-Wan nodded to confirm.

"Amidala is obviously a ceremonial title. Naberrie is our family name and it's not publicly known you must understand."

Obi-Wan stopped himself from trying to guess the situation. He stopped himself so he could analyse what was right in front of him.

A man. Holding a baby. Before he was given a response as to the Senator's whereabouts, Obi-Wan inquired with a smile

"Who is this?"

Most people had a soft spot when talking about children. Especially their own.

"This," the man said proudly "is Luke."

Obi-Wan's mind started pushing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle into place.

“How old is he?” he tried to sound as friendly as possible.

“Just over a month,” the man grinned.

A new baby. While they was missing. This was nothing like he had imagined. Senator Amidala had given birth.

“Padmé, I mean the Senator is asleep, is it urgent?” came a friendly inquiry.

Everything made sense. A man in her apartment while she slept, affectionately nursing a child exactly the right age. The way he’d just said ‘our family name’. This was obviously her husband. It all made sense. Almost.

“Do you know Anakin Skywalker?” he pushed.

He pushed with the force, knowing he needed a definitive answer.

“Yes. He’s a very good friend to Padmé,” the husband answered. “He protected her from assassination attempts.”

Oh Anakin. Obi-Wan’s heart almost broke for the young man. Despite the fact that the woman had married another man, had given birth to his child, Anakin had still been so loyal as to jeopardise his own reputation, his life’s work to simply protect her.

He truly had the disposition of a Jedi if he could block his sometimes overwhelming emotions that much.

“Should I leave a message from you?” he was pushed.

Obi-Wan shook his head. He already felt guilty enough for all the activities he’d pinned on the Senator. And all that time she’d simply been carrying on with her own life. He felt a measurable degree of discomfort that he’d been so carried away with his theories to think of actually confronting the honourable woman with them. He definitely didn’t want her to know he’d been here.

“No, thank you.”

He bowed politely and retreated to the turbo-lift, welcoming the sensation as it fell rapidly away from the friend he’d been about to accuse.

The door slid shut again just before a voice from the kitchen called “Darred?”

Padmé’s brother-in-law turned with his first nephew happy in his arms. Sola emerged, wiping her hands as she confronted her husband.

“Who was that?”

Darred shrugged and settled on the couch. He’d forgotten how cute they were when they were this little.

“A friend of Padmé’s. Obi-Wan, I think. He said not to disturb her.”

She nodded and disappeared once more, leaving her husband and nephew to it.

“I wonder if he knew who your daddy was,” Darred queried the little boy. “Because we’d sure like someone to tell us.”

Obi-Wan was disgusted with himself. He pulled his hood over his head and hoped Captain Typho didn’t recognise him as he slipped out of the building.

Waiting for the transport he felt exposed. Like everyone was watching him. Had witnessed his monumental mistake.

He had always expected something more than simple friendship existed between Padmé and Anakin. Certainly Anakin was attracted to the Senator. But he had attributed the drop in perceiving Anakin’s feelings for the Senator to the growth of Anakin’s mind shields. Not to the actual lessening of Anakin’s temptation.

The transport pulled up. As quickly as he could Obi-Wan made his way to a quiet seat near the back.

It now seemed Anakin had successfully brought his attachment to her under control. That impressed Obi-Wan more than anything.

Then he remembered that Anakin had disappeared for four months. Without telling anyone. Simply because the Senator and her husband were having a baby. Obi-Wan squinted out the window. Maybe Anakin did still have those feelings after all. And for some reason had decided to torture himself. Simply to act as a friend for the Senator.

Assassination. The husband had said assassination attempts. With Palpatine’s recent outburst it was possible the plan to murder a number of senators had actually approached fruition. And Anakin had taken it upon himself to protect his crush from any threat. Especially if he’d been the one to discover that threat.

Almost having absolved his friend of nothing more than loyalty, Obi-Wan disembarked at the Jedi temple.

Master Windu met him at the entrance.

“He’s made a critical error and the time for our attack has come. We have to move now.”

It was a brief, concise greeting but the Master had said everything he needed to.

Obi-Wan nodded, already heading for the briefing room. At his side with equally powerful strides Master Windu began a list of all who would take part in the offence.

“The 501st, you, me, Kit Fisto —”

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan interrupted.

Master Windu didn’t even have to reject him verbally. His feelings were clear. But he did it anyway.

“Absolutely not. You yourself obviously feel his insubordination has still not been dealt with, and it is clear his justification for such a disappearance had not assuaged your curiosity.”

“He is the best we have. And in his short life he has already killed one Sith. He admitted to me himself that Palpatine has been attempting to mould him. This is an opponent he knows very well.”

Windu eyed him speculatively but gave a curt nod.

“We’ll brief in four hours while our intelligence unit finishes gathering information. See to it that Skywalker attends.”

Obi-Wan nodded briefly, watching Windu walk off. Anakin had his trust back. The Senator had her own little family, and all the mistrust he had heaped at his Padawan’s feet was swept away. As Obi-Wan strolled through the corridors, moving thoughtfully to the residential quarters, he scolded himself, wondering what evidence he’d even had in the first place to warrant such a suspicion. A few affectionate glances here and there, the choice to spend some of his time on Naboo — nothing that should draw such scandalous criticism. Why, his last visit to Naboo had been over nine months ago.

Obi-Wan’s footsteps halted with a suddenness that brought his body to an abrupt and uncomfortable halt. Nine months, no, it absolutely could not be. He could not even begin to imagine that the little boy he’d just seen wasn’t in his father’s arms at all. That Anakin had participated in some extra-marital affair with Naboo’s senator was too disastrous to contemplate. That she would have given birth to a child, his child — no! Absolutely not. Obi-Wan refused to believe it. And yet the seeds of doubt were already sending down roots.

Chastising himself he decided there was only one way to settle this. He turned his feet towards the archives and hurried for a terminal. Trying not to draw attention he settled nervously, calling up the Republic citizens register and filling in as many fields as he knew.

Name:? **Amidala**

Sex: **M**

Date of Birth:

Race: **Humanoid**

Place of Birth: **Naboo**

Mother: **Padmé Amidala**

Mother’s Maiden Name:

Obi-Wan paused. He actually had no idea. That woman he’d met months ago was obviously her mother-in-law. The field flashed at him and although he knew entering more data would considerably narrow down his search he had no option but to leave it blank.

Mother’s Date of Birth:

Mother’s Planet of Origin: **Naboo**

Mother’s Planet of Current Residence: **Naboo**

Mother’s Occupation: **Senator**

Father:

Here Obi-Wan stopped himself. He knew the father's name — Darred Naberrie. At least he hoped so. And the man had asked him not to reveal their family name — typing it into a Coruscant database query was not keeping it secret. And, unfortunately, that was a field that could be falsified should Anakin have actually impregnated the senator in the most extreme case. Besides, it wasn't names he was interested in. There was one thing that would say for sure whether Anakin was the father of her child, so he left that field blank too.

Father:

Father's Date of Birth:

Father's Planet of Origin:

Father's Planet of Current Residence: **Naboo**

Father's Occupation:

Date of Parents marriage:

Place of Parents marriage:

Prior Siblings:

It was rather incomplete but he hoped it was enough. He pressed submit and almost immediately the record popped up. Filed last night. His eyes narrowed, considering for a moment just how terribly convenient that was.

Stop it! You have no proof — you must reserve judgement until the facts are before you. That child was a newborn; it may well have taken this long to register his birth.

He looked at all the fields, not at all surprised to find that most of them were labelled classified, including all information pertaining to the father and the little boy's parent's marriage. What he wanted to see was the single field down the bottom that all babies must have completed during the first six months of their life.

Midichlorian count: **Untested**

Obi-Wan's eyes narrowed. Now that was awfully handy. How was it that all children who were born in a hospital received a quick test at birth, but this young boy with questionable paternity hadn't?

He closed down the terminal and stood, already resuming his course for Anakin's quarters. He would subtly probe Anakin about this whole situation now, and find the answers he was looking for.

Anakin was puffing as he palmed open the door to his quarters. It had been a long time since he'd had someone to spar with. He had remained physically fit during his time away, but he hadn't had a partner for lightsaber duels.

And being back at the temple, he was availing himself of all the opponents there were. He'd almost been beaten on two occasions.

It helped to occupy his mind, taking his thoughts away from Padmé, Leia and Luke.

Padmé.

With a frown he started removing his clothes. His fingers curled in on themselves, almost clenching in the thin fabric of his shirt. Every moment away from her sapped a little more of his strength. He was emotionally drained, aching to just be near her. And their months together had only made his reliance upon her more intense. Shoulder slumping further he stepped into the shower, allowing himself the luxury of remembering. Her calm voice as it washed over him. That quiet belief in the strength of the Republic. The touch of her fingertips brushing across the back of his hand. The water plastered his hair to his head but he was far away. Not living in memories of the past now, but imagining himself where he would be most happy. At home, drinking in the presence of Padmé. Preferably surrendering to the feeling of her embrace.

He could swear he felt her loving fingers wrap around his arms, the tingling on his skin was so intense. It jerked him back to reality, and hurriedly he tried to focus on the present. He couldn't think about her, about their love. Not in here, not at the temple. There were too many Jedi who could pick up on his overwhelmingly consuming emotions, and he wouldn't allow it.

In a desperate attempt to shake himself out of it he blasted himself with cold water, then redressed in something cleaner, less sweaty. Obsessively, his thoughts dwelt on nothing else.

The loss of her company was throbbing away, a pain in his heart.

Stop it! he blasted himself. *Obi-Wan mustn't know! Sidious!*

That quick reminder of why he was really here was all he needed. Until that monster was dead, he could never be sure that the twins were safe. And even the desire to feel the soft lumps of weight cuddling into his arms wasn't enough to blind him to that fact. Sidious needed to die. And he needed to turn his mind to something else. Calm down so he could clear his mind and think.

With a stretch he tried to relax his over-worked muscles.

Anakin lay out on what was technically his bed. Technically in that he had slept here exactly once in the four years this had been his allocated space.

His hands raised, linking themselves behind his head. That one night. His face screwed up in remembrance.

Near the beginning of their marriage. When he had been on Coruscant a whole month, not yet acquainted with the agony of being separated from Padmé. And they'd had their first fight. A big one.

Sighing he remembered storming out of her apartment. Spending the night at the temple. Now that he thought about it, his hope had been to punish her in some way. For not agreeing with him. Only in reality he'd lain here, aching. Distraught at the idea that she was so close and not by his side. By the time morning had come, he was almost in tears. But, not wanting to give in so easily and wound his pride, he made his way back to her apartment. Coolly entering in silence and staring her down.

With a smile he remembered her turning to him as he stepped through the door. Looking at her from across the room. Seeing a sad smile come onto her face as she immediately

approached him.

Trying to hide that his heart was soaring as she unabashedly looped her arms around his neck. Listening to her as she told him

“You ran away from me. It hurt more than our fight to know you were nearby and purposely staying away. You could have stayed, slept on the other side of the bed.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“We can’t make up if you’re not here.”

His mind drifted off down the “making up” path. And with a groan, he was again reminded that once more she was incredibly close, but he was choosing to keep them separated. Although in this case it was in an attempt to maintain their relationship.

Still, three nights apart when she was literally minutes away was making him very aware of how much he’d come to love having her with him.

It didn’t take many more thoughts to lead him to the single most satisfying conclusion he’d been trying to reach for half a week.

He sat up, grabbed his boots from the side of the bed and pulled them on, one at a time.

Go and see Padmé. Only for a little while, he wouldn’t stay the night. Just a few hours in her company. Her voice and her thoughts and her energy in his awareness. It would freshen him, as hours of constant sparring over the course of three days could not.

“Anakin!” a voice greeted jovially as the door swished open.

He tried not to make it seem as if he was guilty, being caught.

“Obi-Wan,” he nodded.

His hand continued to tug his boot over his foot.

“Sidious is trapped. We’re meeting to brief now.”

His head shot up. *Sidious!*

Something occurred to him, and Anakin grinned. They trusted him! They were inviting him to join the biggest Jedi operation that had occurred in the last millennia.

“You want me to come?” he inquired, just to be sure.

“Of course.”

Obi-Wan’s face flashed a hint of something that moved by too quickly for Anakin to pick up on.

He stood tall off his bed, gesturing to Obi-Wan.

“Lead the way.”

He pushed the thought of Padmé and the two sweet little babies he hadn’t seen in half an eternal week to the back of his mind.

As they strode, side-by-side and determined down the grand corridor Obi-Wan quietly murmured “I know Senator Amidala was having her child.”

Anakin forced himself to keep moving, not to stop in shock or even register the crushing feeling of imminent destruction that washed over him. Obi-Wan knew. About Padmé, and about the babies apparently.

No, baby, he only knows about one. I wonder how he knows, if he's seen one of them? Don't give anything away, he may know very little.

As Anakin allowed a small ray of hope to shine through he knew he had to find out exactly how much Obi-Wan knew. The less, the better, and he shouldn't be the one to give away his own secrets.

“Oh?” was the simple reply he gave.

“He hasn't had a midichlorian test done yet.”

“I'm sure the senator has been busy, I have no doubt she will get around to it.”

Anakin grimaced, knowing exactly why his children had not had their routine baby health tests done yet. First, he knew they were healthy, he'd done a more than thorough scan of them both himself. And second, more importantly, a midichlorian test would only reflect what he already knew — that they had inherited a strong connection to the force that could easily be traced back to their father.

Why would Obi-Wan be pushing to have that done? Unless he suspected that Anakin's attachment to Padmé went beyond friendship.

“What exactly are you implying?” he snapped at the master after half a minute of silence.

“Should I be implying something?” Obi-Wan answered back calmly.

He knows Anakin immediately panicked. He does know — he knows about us, he knows about Luke. There's only one way to get around this — be disgusted by his allegation and get the twins tested as quickly as possible. Somehow I'm going to have to falsify their results.

“You shouldn't, but you are,” Anakin seethed.

Neither said a word as the meeting room approached and, for now, the subject was dropped.

Chapter 14

Additional warning: There is a somewhat adult scene in this chapter. I've been trying for three months to get rid of it, but it's not possible, so I've decided to give up and leave it in. Perhaps younger or easily offended readers should skip to chapter fifteen.

Chapter Fourteen

Padmé's mind brushed against consciousness as a muffled noise disturbed her. Her exhausted body didn't care though. She just rolled to the middle of her bed looking for Anakin's comforting body, already on the path back to sleep. The chest she expected to snuggle up against remained elusive. Tiredly her hand stretched out a little further to find him.

"Anakin?" she muttered hoarsely.

His soothing voice didn't reply. Blearily Padmé resigned herself to the inevitable and cracked an eye open. What she'd expected to see was the relaxing spring sunshine of late afternoon falling in shafts over their elegant bed at Varykino. For the first time in her life the sight of her sleek Coruscant apartment lit by the stray nighttime lights of nearby buildings was definitely unwelcome.

No Anakin Padmé reminded herself quietly.

The beat of her heart dipped briefly. That painful 'he's not here right beside me' moment of realisation. Then she truly took note of the time of day. Night. When she had fallen asleep it couldn't have been more than early afternoon.

In fright she threw off the covers and sprung from the bed. *The twins can't possibly have slept for that long!* Her bare feet didn't register the sensation of soft carpet beneath them, only that she couldn't move fast enough. Dark eyes settled on two empty cradles as if in slow motion.

"Nooo," she moaned in a low tone, not even realising the sound was escaping from her lips.

A deep agony pierced her gut. She flew from her room, lips parting to scream Dormé's name in a panic. Her mind was not even truly functioning. Filled only with one horrifying thought. Her children. *Leia! Luke! They've been kidnapped!* Her precious children had been stolen. Killed. An assassin had managed to smuggle poisonous creatures into her room before, somehow they'd managed to take Luke and Leia now.

Oh no, oh goodness no.

Her robe strained, caught in wind resistance and angling behind her like a cape as she escaped into the living room only to stop dead in her tracks. Her body literally kept carrying forward with momentum and she had to reach out and grab the wall to stop herself from tripping over.

“Sola.”

There was her sister. With Luke in her arms. And from the floor a happy gurgling sound quickly announced Leia’s presence too.

Padmé closed her eyes and took a deep breath, the adrenaline pounding her heart at a furious rate.

“You’re here,” she greeted.

Valiantly she quickly let a smile rise onto her face. She wouldn’t let them see how much what they’d done had frightened her. That taking her children from her bedroom in what had obviously been some misguided attempt at helping her by letting her sleep on, had made her feel more fear than she’d experienced in months. And that was quite something, considering her beloved young husband was at this moment trying to track down a masochistic Sith Lord.

“Hello Padmé,” Both Sola and Darred greeted simultaneously.

Padmé finally trusted herself enough to stand and walk the short distance between them. She couldn’t be grateful that they were here just yet. Her blood was still pumping painfully fast through her body. The elder sister received a warm hug when Padmé reached her. But the little boy in her arms was the recipient of a fiercely protective caress. It was all the Senator of an entire planet could do to leave Luke to his aunt’s company and not steal him away. She felt an almost overwhelming need to run her fingers over Luke’s entire body and make sure he was truly alright. Not that Sola or Darred would hurt him, it was just that...

Before she became overwhelmed with relief, Padmé walked over to the long divan and pressed a kiss to Darred’s cheek.

“You made it to Coruscant so quickly,” she tried to be upbeat.

The new mother’s hands reached for the baby on the floor, hoping the desperation in her eyes wasn’t showing. Darred gave up teasing Leia from above with a bright shiny toy and let Padmé pick her up for a cuddle.

The relief of pressing Leia into her chest was palpable. With a sigh Padmé could finally turn her eyes to the other grown-ups. The beloved sister who had rushed across space to be here with her. To help her.

“Of course we are. Padmé — *what* is going on?” Sola asked, trying to be kind.

The confusion on her face was obvious. They spoke at least weekly of course, but Padmé had never mentioned a man in her life. Let alone being pregnant. And if the brief run-in with her parents a few weeks ago hadn’t been told over and over for Sola and Darred by now, Padmé would be much surprised. No doubt that had startled them, but to come here and find her alone with two incredibly sweet little infants was something else entirely.

Leia started grizzling, and Padmé hid a small grin as she pressed her lips to Leia’s cheek.

“Shhh, baby,” she soothed.

Her little newborn Jedi could no doubt feel the stress her mother was under. While Padmé tickled her nose over Leia’s she quietly pondered just what she was going to say to her relatives. The calming of her daughter almost second nature by now.

“You shouldn’t hold her like that Padmé. Here, try this.”

Sola handed Luke to Darred and rushed over, taking Padmé’s wrist and moving it higher up Leia’s little back. Padmé couldn’t even resist the forced movement she was too stunned.

“Err, thank you.”

Padmé hoped she sounded grateful and didn’t show the surprise she felt. Fortunately Leia was already responding to the more familiar and comforting feeling of Padmé’s soothing fingertips and a soft bouncing rhythm, and her aunt saw no more reason to interfere.

“You’re quite welcome. Honestly Padmé I’m glad you called us when you did — you know nothing about small children!”

Turning away to look out over the colourful Coruscant skyline Padmé tried not to show just how much that comment hurt her. *I know enough!* she silently protested, her vision swimming. Even a hint of accusation that she was a bad mother could not have offended her any more deeply, but she kept it to herself. Focusing on keeping Leia happy.

A tear tracked out of her eye and down her cheeks unbidden. She rationalised that her hormonal levels weren’t quite right, that she should be objective and know that tears were an overreaction to an offhanded comment. But it had been months since she’d fully moved in normal society. Months where the absolute worst complaint levelled at her had fallen from the loving lips of her husband. And even then, it was a drowsy plea made in half-consciousness, to let him hold her closer while they slept. It helped give Sola’s words just a little more sting.

“I’m not a bad mother,” she whispered beneath her breath to Leia.

Her lips again found the very fine curls that covered her daughter’s head.

“I’ll make some tea. Then you can tell us everything,” Sola continued to bustle.

It seemed she didn’t even realise the effect of her barb as she walked into the other room. And it increased the yearning for Anakin ten fold. The lover whose words would never strike her so harshly. A silence fell over the sitting room, only Luke’s laughing puncturing the stillness.

Padmé stared out at the skyline, her eyes tracking to the spires of the Jedi temple. Not lit directly it seemed to capture all the light around it and reflect like a shining beacon.

My heart is yours she sent out in a quiet thought, hoping that *he* knew that. That *he* would come back to her whole. Sola’s noises in the kitchen were somewhat muffled but Padmé could hear the sound of water boiling, of Threepio being offhandedly ordered around.

He’s not just a machine, you don’t have to be so rude Padmé admonished in her mind. Anakin’s creation was a friend as far as she was concerned. He didn’t deserve to be treated so harshly. But her sister had abandoned her own life and family to come here and help her, so Padmé bit her tongue. And ordered her heart to stop turning her annoyance at her sister’s little habits into a deeper longing for the complementarity Anakin’s company offered.

The sound of Darred clearing his throat interrupted her silent reverie.

“Padmé...”

He trailed off, obviously unsure about what he was going to say next. Meanwhile Padmé steeled herself, preparing for the next admonishment. She wasn't quite prepared when her only brother-in-law softly grinned at her.

"Congratulations."

That wasn't what she was expecting at all. A gentle smile covered Padmé's features and she turned to look over her shoulder at him. He stood, Luke in his arms and enjoying his tickling fingers, and came to join her at the window.

"I truly mean that. They're both beautiful. Although I must admit I'm partial to this one, your dad and I need some help on our side — for when the Naberrie women turn on us."

Padmé gave him a true smile, knowing he could never understand how grateful she was.

"Thank you Darred."

She let her gaze linger over Luke, seeing how happy he was to be in his uncle's arms. Leia too was cheering up and together the pair of them amused the adults for the next few minutes.

"I'm sorry to take you away from the girls."

Darred waved off her apology, clearly seeing Luke as a very worthwhile consolation prize.

"They loved the idea of staying at Grandma and Grandpa's for a little while. Of course they'll be spoiled rotten, but it can't be helped."

Padmé shared his knowing grin, wondering at how many treats her nieces would be able to wheedle out of their grandparents in the coming days.

"No, start dinner now," Sola's voice carried to them as she snapped at Threepio.

She re-emerged with the golden droid following her, ordering him to set the tea tray he was carrying down on the long low table. The scent of Hoi Broth overwhelmed the room, stunning Padmé's senses almost immediately.

"Threepio," she asked in her understated voice, trying to keep her tone level.

Her stomach rebelled and a nausea she'd gotten over before Leia and Luke were born returned with a vengeance. Threatening to bring up what little was in her stomach and have her retching in moments.

"Is — is that Hoi Broth?" she asked, subtly trying to breathe through her mouth.

"Yes," Sola cut her faithful droid off. "You've been asleep for hours and you can't have eaten much today, I thought you might be hungry."

Valiantly Padmé smiled at the thought behind the gesture of her sister's. It was sweet of her to care like that, but the rolling of her stomach left her feeling decidedly light headed. Disgustingly sick. Maintaining her composure she smiled at the sincere concern but addressed Threepio directly when she next murmured

"That's very thoughtful but I'm fine. Could you take it back to the kitchen please Threepio?"

"Of course Miss Padmé," he hurriedly answered, separating the broth from the tea.

As he was bent over he continued to fuss, obviously concerned as he hurried “I tried to tell your sister that even the scent of Hoi Broth has made you quite violently ill during your pregnancy but she wouldn’t listen to me!”

The smile that twitched on Padmé’s lips this time was genuine. Yes, Threepio knew. Even when Anakin hadn’t known because he was still out battling in the Outer Rim sieges, Threepio had known that Hoi Broth had become her worst enemy. And he’d been her best friend in making sure to keep it away if at all possible. But just now he’d certainly put his foot in it.

“Yes, thank you Threepio. It would be wonderful if you could start dinner for us though.”

“Of *course* Miss Padmé!”

She shot an apologetic but wry grin at Sola.

“I’m sorry Padmé, I didn’t know.”

“It’s alright,” the younger sister waved her off.

Her stomach began to settle as the scent began to waft out of the room. Even so, to get away from that remaining stench she walked towards the balcony, grabbing a small blanket to wrap around Leia and walking out into the cool night air.

“If I’d known you didn’t like it — if I’d known anything *real* about you these past few months I might not have made such a mistake!” Sola told her indignantly. Then she gave an exasperated sigh. “You shouldn’t have them out in the night air like that! It’s bad for them!”

Padmé clenched her teeth, trying not to turn around and snap back at her sister. With a few deep breaths she resolved to simply let the comment pass, however irritated she was. Sola was only trying to help. Unfortunately, Leia wasn’t on her side this evening, and writhed uncomfortably.

“Shhh, Leia, Leia,” she hushed.

Soon, however, they weren’t alone on the balcony. Sola was at her elbow, demanding they return indoors so Leia wouldn’t catch a chill.

“It’s fine, Sola,” Padmé said quietly.

Leia’s complaining got even louder. Sola continued to pester. And eventually Padmé couldn’t stand it anymore and simply moved inside. But Sola’s gloating

“that’s much better, isn’t it Leia?” to the little baby who was no calmer in the warmer Hoi-broth-saturated air grated against Padmé’s nerves.

Diplomatically, she decided to retreat and regather herself. Without making a fuss she shot Sola a thin smile and sidestepped her interfering.

“I’m going to feed her. I’ll be back in a little while.”

The escape back into her bedroom brought palpable relief to Padmé. And Leia, it seemed, was as hungry for her mother’s attention as she was for dinner. As soon as they were alone she quieted, her eyes locking to Padmé’s and refusing to let go. In the quiet of her bedroom they sat together, Padmé ignoring the noises outside and Leia seeming oblivious to them.

Eventually the little one had fallen to sleep, and Padmé returned to the living room without her.

“Did she go to sleep?” Sola asked, her eyes tracking to Padmé like a hawk the minute her door opened in front of her.

“Yes. I think she was tired, hungry.”

Before the younger sister could get another word out, could mention that perhaps her son too was heading for slumber at this time of day, Sola pronounced as if she was a galaxy-recognised authority

“You should feed him too. Little babies need to be on a regular routine, and it would be better for you if you kept them both on the same one.”

Don't. Say. Anything Padmé warned herself. Her forced smile returned again and she scooped up her son from Darred.

Almost as soon as he was with her Luke opened up his little lungs and let loose. It brought an annoying laugh of

“They certainly don't like you, do they?”

that cut her so deeply Padmé literally had no response. She just took her son and disappeared. Without knowing whether to cry over her bad attempts at motherhood or be furious with Sola, she was almost shaking. Luke didn't calm down, which made things worse. The more she tried to soothe him, the more upset he became. Finally Padmé let being insulted fall by the wayside and turned all her attention to Luke.

“Come on Prince Luke,” she murmured softly.

With loving hands she rubbed his back, her gentle coaxes finally settling him into her arms. Once he was drinking hungrily, Padmé turned her mind back to her sister. Why Sola, who had always been happy to simply provide a shoulder to lean against, was now full of authoritative commands.

Quietly she wondered if there wasn't something else that was really making Sola so irritable. Like hurt. Perhaps she was upset that she hadn't been privy to Padmé's most treasured, precious secret. And the fact she still didn't know was probably aggravating her more.

Padmé tipped her head and looked up at the ceiling for a moment, thinking. Even as the younger sister, she had always been the more successful one. Excelling at school, elected a queen, a Senator, known and loved by millions on their home planet. There had only been one field left to her older sister to trump her — matters of the heart.

Sola had always had the one thing Padmé had seemed unable to attain — a man who loved her and a perfect little family to raise. Sola was a wonderful mother, it was the only talent she had where she could still pressure her younger sister to imitate her. And now Padmé had it. Sola might not know about Anakin, about just how close they were, how truly complete she felt in his company. But she could see that Padmé at least now had the children Sola had always pestered her about. And now, now she was left to find fault in her last bastion of strength. Causing her to focus on where she thought she was still superior to Padmé — her

child-rearing skills. And not knowing anything about the situation was probably making it even worse.

Knowing all this didn't have her remarks leaving Padmé any less deficient. Carefully she collected her thoughts, and tried to work out just how much Sola and Darred were going to hear about the somewhat elusive private life of Padmé Amidala. Without letting them know how hurt she was by Sola's cutting remarks.

The centre of Senator Amidala's private life, the sun all her planets revolved around, had no idea of the emotional turmoil she was in. Instead, the thoughts that had consumed him so much over the last few days — of warm acceptance and love coming from dark, intimate eyes — were totally banished from his mind. For the moment, he was listening intently as Master Windu gave a report on Sidious' known movements.

The Jedi council's de facto deputy continued to drone on. Anakin mind wasn't paying as much attention as the comrades that surrounded him. Instead, he studied the giant revolving projection of Geonosis with some trepidation. The system that had already devastated the Jedi once in this war was definitely where the Sith Lord was gathering his forces. The planet Master Windu was gesturing to, however, just didn't feel... right.

Anakin started as he finally admitted that to himself. *Yes! It doesn't feel right! That's not where he is at all!* Tactically the Hero With No Fear had just as much experience as anyone else in this room, even a little less, perhaps. But his ability to perceive the force in a different way separated him from their collective knowledge. And his drive to destroy the Sith Lord was so much more intimate, so much more intense. Not for the grandeur and security of the Republic. For the distinctly personal and far more important reason of providing a safe, carefree and happy existence for the children he and Padmé had created. His eyes saw the strategic map with a huge flaw no one else did.

He bided his time, now paying full attention to what Master Windu had to say and wondering just how flawed their intelligence really was. It would be absolutely useless, death warrants, to go in unprepared. And he, for one, fully planned to be back here to love Padmé and raise their twins, not fuel a funeral pyre.

When questions were finally invited Anakin beat everyone to it. Even the other masters, who by custom usually responded first, were left to listen to the suspicious hero.

"Your data is flawed," Anakin immediately pronounced.

Windu looked surprised at such an out and out dismissal but didn't ignore him. Anakin truly felt like the Jedi he'd always striven to be as the Korun Master invited him to explain his reasoning.

"On what basis?" the expressionless tone asked.

In a move highly unprecedented Anakin stood from his seat and moved down the small amphitheatre to the stage. He touched a few buttons, altering the projection to focus on the smallest planet in the system, the one Master Windu had just finished telling them Sidious was on.

“This is barely more than a large asteroid with an atmosphere. It has little, if any natural defensive positions and there is no life beyond the microscopic level.”

Anakin stared at Master Windu, then turned to his colleagues to impress upon them the gravity of the mistaken location.

“Without prolific life, the connection to the force on this planet is weak at best. And Sidious would be leaving himself exposed. We’re in the right system but we have the wrong planet.”

He pressed again at the control panel, and the planet minimised, back to its place where it happily revolved around its sun. Under his command the planet that rotated two orbits out from the mere asteroid was magnified.

A giant red rock surrounded by an asteroid belt.

“There is a reason the Separatists have used Geonosis as a stronghold for so long.”

A few disbelieving murmurs went around the room. To some extent Anakin could understand why, surely it would be predictable to return to the beginning of the war? He could see a nice symmetry about it — where the Sith had revealed themselves so would they be destroyed. The war would finally be at an end at the same place where it had begun.

Perhaps Gunray would finally stop hunting Padmé and life for her wouldn’t have to be so dangerous, she could be free and safe. A small smirk struggled for suppression across his lips. *Well, I don’t want her too safe* he cheekily admitted. *Then she’d have no legitimate reason for a Jedi protector.*

When the quiet conversations had died down and everyone had expectantly turned back to him, he continued with his theory.

“Geonosis has rugged terrain — lots of hiding spots and places to observe your enemy without revealing yourself. There is a wide asteroid belt engulfing the planet which makes it impossible to come out of hyperspace near enough to launch a surprise attack, and there is the added risk of navigating through the debris before you can make planetfall.”

He pointed to each of the features as he spoke, feeling a wave of agreement throughout the room for the valid points he was making. It bolstered his confidence, made him feel accepted and respected as never before.

With a gesture he indicated the planetoid Master Windu had pegged as Sidious’ hideout.

“You could also have an uninterrupted view to any surprise attacks on the smaller planets in the system without revealing yourself.”

Then there was the most important point of all. One that should have occurred first to them all, as Jedi rather than warriors.

“Although it is a desert, there is a wealth of adapted life crawling the surface. The force is clearer, to be manipulated or allied with, in such an area.”

Now Anakin turned to Master Windu, knowing he couldn’t seem too cocky or he’d be dismissed out of hand. Trying his best, he imitated the one person who always seemed to have others come around to her point of view.

“Is there any way the intelligence could have been misunderstood, that he is actually on Geonosis? Or that he has manipulated us? Attacking our original destination could actually lead to us being ambushed.”

Windu appeared to mull over Anakin’s questions for no more than a split second before he nodded. Anakin could have been knocked over with a feather — how often was it that *Windu* of all people trusted and believed in him?

“Anakin’s right. The intelligence named the system, I assumed it wouldn’t be Geonosis because the first engagement there so many months ago destroyed the droid foundries and left that region particularly vulnerable. However our armies did move on and it is quite possible they’ve rebuilt.”

He inclined his head in a polite bow of thanks to Anakin, giving him permission to retake his place in the stepped seats.

Anakin nodded and took his place beside Obi-Wan once more. Still too stunned to really understand that he’d just had such faith put in him.

“Well done, Padawan,” Obi-Wan teased him.

Anakin shot him a mock glare, and in that instant, the suspicion between them was gone. He was confident in his ability to be a Jedi even with the love of his young family dominating his heart. And it was obvious Obi-Wan knew when it was time to think of things more important than accusing your friends on circumstantial evidence. The camaraderie between the Hero With No Fear and the Negotiator returned, as did the surety that one way or another, the Sith were about to be defeated.

Padmé left Luke to sleep in his cradle and finally returned to the living room. As luck would have it, Threepio was just informing the others dinner was ready.

“Thank you Threepio,” Padmé genuinely appreciated.

She gestured for the other two to join her in the laid-out dining room.

“This looks wonderful,” she commented to the golden droid as they seated themselves. “I’m starved.”

“I’m more interested in hearing, well, everything,” Sola grinned.

Padmé reached for a platter of vegetables and helped herself, mulling over where to begin.

“It’s a long story.”

She knew it was avoiding the question, but somehow she was still unsure of what to tell them. How to explain her twins without including the young Jedi who shared her bed? How to explain being at the lakehouse without explaining her reason for hiding? How to explain being up there with only him for company without mentioning that he was the only one she could ever need?

And though Sola had encouraged her with the more familiar, sisterly tone, the unintentional insults of before had not yet retreated from memory.

“Start simple,” Sola coaxed.

Simple. Nothing in her life was simple.

“For example, who is their father?”

Hurriedly she dropped her eyes as an image of Anakin’s bare-chested body flashed into her mind. His naked limbs caressing her with want that seemed to never be satisfied. Intensity, dark and pure smouldering in his eyes, quiet groans slipping from between his lips that would only ever sound for her.

Then she imagined Sola. Just one slip of her tongue in a village conversation that would spell a certain death to the man Anakin was, that would strip him of his identity.

No way would she risk that for the sake of satisfying her sister’s curiosity. Her pause was obviously becoming too long and she had to think of something to say. Without including Anakin.

“Their father is not involved,” Padmé pronounced firmly.

Even though it killed her to say it. It was a lie, an utter lie. Because their father was very very involved. With their children and with her. It had devastated him to leave them three days ago, and it would devastate him to hear her denying his place by her side. Still, it couldn’t be helped and she forced herself to meet Sola and Darred’s curious gazes with no remorse.

“Was he a —”

Darred shared a look with his wife and didn’t finish the sentence. And Padmé wasn’t going to be helping them out, this discussion was difficult enough as it was.

“A one night-stand?” Sola asked tentatively.

“Something like that,” Padmé commented dryly.

She picked up her fork and hungrily began her meal. A private smile was the only outward sign of her internal amusement. The idea that Anakin would accept sleeping with her once and moving on was laughable. But even funnier was that two years ago they *had* the physical relationship of a recurring one-night stand. Anakin would be home for one night, disappear for a few weeks and suddenly reappear for a weekend, or a few hours. His words, his hunger, the subtle brushes of his hands and the way he made her feel — they were another story altogether. He returned to her with longing more and more pronounced the older he became. The notion that that man, her Ani, could even try to be emotionally detached like a twelve-hour lover made her want to giggle. But she didn’t.

Just took a bite of the deliciously colourful vegetable tart and waited for the next question.

“Will he be around at all?”

With the ease she’d answered the previous inquiry with, she smoothly continued to fib

“No.”

Meanwhile her attention was only partially on her present company. The rest of her mind was quite happily occupied with the thought of Anakin’s hands. And all the things they did

when he was in a good mood. It was the next question that really brought about the major flaw in her partial story. The big hole that didn't make sense if you were to pretend Anakin and their forbidden union didn't exist.

"Then why didn't you tell anyone that you were pregnant? Why did mum and dad have to find you for us to even know you'd had twins?"

Briefly she closed her eyes in thanks. Their parents. Yes yes yes, it was perfect. The cover story Anakin had given them then — that she was under attack and in hiding. It would work so well to continue that now.

"I hadn't known for long when I went into hiding. I couldn't break com silence Sola, you must understand that?"

Darred nodded believingly, but her sister didn't follow him as quickly as Padmé would have liked.

"But why didn't you tell us you were coming to Naboo?"

"I was being threatened," she tried to protest.

Desperately she tried to focus on the present. Pushing Anakin's image out of her mind wasn't helping though. It only reminded her that perhaps their parting on the landing platform could be their last. He could be on any planet in goodness-knew what kinds of danger, and here the Naberrie sisters were, arguing over nothing of consequence. There were so many more important things in the universe. Beyond Sola and her incessant need to control. And not just the planets that were being destroyed but her life. Her family life, the one that began when Anakin walked unharmed back into her apartment.

"How long were you up at that house of yours anyway?" Sola snapped.

The younger sister recoiled. *Long enough to be truly happy* she snapped in her mind. *Why do you always have to know everything about me? My life is not yours to run.* She had a flash of her dinner a handful of nights ago. In the private dining room as the sunset across the vast expanse of water. Anakin across from her, a sad grin on his face. And his hand outstretched, clasping hers even as he ate. Then she focused her vision on her angry older sibling. *You don't know anything about me* the Senator quietly realised.

"That's none of your business," Padmé steadily replied.

Sola looked just about ready to spring up from her chair and attack. It was getting harder and harder to maintain her politician's composure.

"I am your sister. What are you hiding from me?"

"I'm not hiding from you Sola. It's simply got nothing to do with you."

Padmé almost considered caving in, telling her sister everything. Just to get her off her back. To force her to realise that truly Sola knew nothing. Wasn't as important as she thought she was. But as soon as she thought about Varykino, about the house up by the lake with its beautiful expansive veranda looking out on to the water, about the big sunlit bedrooms, about the pale blues Anakin had decorated the walls of their nursery in, she knew *that* part of her life was private.

That part of her life was shared with Anakin. That part of her life was her married life. There was so little they had that was shared just between the two of them. She wasn't going to let Sola butt in on that tiny section of her existence that belonged to her and her sweet life companion.

She could handle the constant admonishments about her career, about her lack of life partner, even about her so-called faulty mothering. But sometimes Sola just went too far. Their months together were private, special memories of one of the happiest times in her life, and no one but her husband got to share it with her, no matter how much they insisted they had a right to know.

For the rest of the meal Padmé stayed silent. When it was finished she bid them both a stiff good night and disappeared to her bedroom with a datapad. Her last private sanctuary. Although considering that she'd woken a few hours ago with her children gone, it was obvious Sola didn't even respect that. She changed from her clothes, and checked on the twins one final time. Then she turned to her bed. Her empty bed. Brown eyes fell on the side that would remain empty, that was less rumpled anyway. Unslept in and abandoned. Soundlessly she took up her datapad with its summaries of senate committee outcomes, and climbed into her own half. But the other, *his* spot, remained untouched. Except by her fingers which ghosted over it, longing for it to once again be filled.

Shaking her longing off she turned her attention to her work. Forcing herself to pay attention to the screen. But even then, she missed the familiar weight of his head lying on her thigh.

Padmé awoke the next morning to find Leia and Luke had again been removed from their tiny beds without her consent. This time only a note was waiting for her in the living room, informing her of the trip Sola had planned for them, and that they would return in a few hours. Her apartment seemed empty with the twins and all their noise gone. Padmé turned from where she was staring thoughtfully out over the Coruscant skyline.

To find her husband striding towards her. A huge grin on his face.

When did he come? How did he get in — all the security features were set. Had someone seen him?

She couldn't get a single word out. He pushed her up against the wall, and held her there with just enough force for it to feel really good. His fingers wrapped around her entire hand and held it lovingly against his own shoulder.

And their mouths melded. Passionate, vastly hungry. Lovers fused together.

"Oh Anakin," whispered from between her lips.

His mouth went straight for her neck in the second they were briefly parted. Then she had turned her head and brought him to her once more.

Padmé wasn't even sure her brain was functioning correctly. Anakin was so completely encompassing. She slipped her free arm up around his shoulder. Holding his firm body close.

His proximity was overwhelming, indulging her senses. *Anakin!* her heart cried out in agonised relief.

“Tell me what’s happening,” she murmured.

She raised her fingertips and stroked his cheeks. The skin was so familiar, so warm. In that instant his eyes raised and burned into hers. Bringing all the love and devotion she craved from him.

His lips came in again, but this time their eyes didn’t close. They sipped from one another, caressing lips as they talked. Doing everything they could in the short time they had. For she knew he couldn’t be here long.

“Sidious is trapped on Geonosis of all places,” he murmured back.

Padmé nodded, reaching for his soft lips again.

“Has anyone been hurt?” she asked.

Wrapping her hand around the back of his neck. Holding them together. Loving his slow, passionate, practised kisses. The open skin of his palm slid up the back of her hand so softly she shivered. With precise but unconscious calculations he rubbed his thumb over her the inside of her fingertips. Until she felt like melting under his touch.

“You always worry about others. Will you worry about me?” he softly inquired.

The intensity in their eyes blazed for one another.

“I’m always afraid for you more than anyone,” she whimpered.

Crushing back into his mouth. He wrapped his fingers around her thinning waist. Gripping her tight to him. Pulling her close and rubbing over her sides.

It was so confusing to have him near again. Her mind literally couldn’t cope with Anakin’s tender touches. Restored to her after craving them so desperately the last few days they’d been parted.

They were quiet, lost in each other. Anakin pressed her into the wall, pressed himself harder against her and she moaned very quietly for him.

“When?” she demanded.

A single tear trickled down her cheek. His mouth dropped. Nibbled at her neck just how he’d discovered she loved.

“We leave today,” Anakin whispered over her skin.

He kissed the trail back up to her, suckling away every trace of the agony-induced water drop.

“Don’t cry,” he begged.

His voice distraught with the idea that he had somehow caused her pain. She just nodded and burrowed her hands into his cloak. Searching for the folds in his clothing she knew she could undo.

Padmé needed him. Inside, deep and slow.

“How long do we have?” she demanded.

The fabric parted beneath her familiar hands. His broad chest was slowly revealed to her ravenous gaze. Taught and firm. Her eyes squeezed shut in agony. With little conscious thought she leaned forward, digging her mouth into the space between the ridges his hard pectoral muscles formed.

“About two minutes,” he forlornly groaned.

She let out an agonised squeak. Lifted her head and suckled back on his mouth.

“So soon?” she barely protested.

Her hand delved into the folds and searched out a hard nipple.

“I know. I’m so sorry. I lied so I could come say goodbye and told Obi-Wan R2 had to run a diagnostic test flight on my new fighter. I only have time to give the twins a quick kiss.”

He gasped and dipped his head beneath her ear. Her fingers continued to tease, brazenly rubbing over his perky nipple.

“Twins aren’t here.”

Padmé groaned loudly as Anakin suddenly held her fast to the wall with his weight. Ran his hands down her thighs, then grasped her legs and lifted them.

“Where are they?” he breathily asked.

Her legs locked tight around his waist. She let loose lots of brief murmurs as his hands pushed back her skirts. Caressed the bare skin he found beneath them. Took ownership of her like she truly belonged to him.

It was intoxicating to have the return of such a dominant Anakin.

“It was too hard. I needed help so I told my sister and she’s come to stay with me for a little while. She and her husband have taken them out for a few hours.”

It looked like he was going to stop and consider everything she’d just told him. Of the changes that were happening here in their home while he was forced to stay away. But she pushed back on his tunics to expose his chest and the tops of his broad shoulders. Then sunk her lips into one firm muscle and sucked.

“We have to be really quick,” he told her with a sudden mischief she hadn’t seen in his eyes in months.

The twins had placed too much responsibility onto his young shoulders. It was a thought that briefly flashed through her mind. Right before he clasped her rear and slid into her.

Her face lit up as he sunk back into her mouth while she was crying out “Oh *Anakin!*”

As Anakin sunk both his body and mind into her, he could feel her distress. It screamed at him through the force, though she was hiding it well.

“What is it?” he asked.

Her eyes fluttered while Anakin watched her hungrily. Shuddered as she touched his bared chest. Studied her worriedly. Waiting for her to respond to his question seemed to take forever. His lips tasted her mouth. Sucking in a breath. Pressing for her to tell him.

“What’s wrong?” he persisted.

His confident hands clasped her closer and rubbed against her shoulders. Trying to soothe whatever was troubling her. At the moment all he wanted was for her to confide in him. To help her change whatever was making her unhappy. How he hated it when she was unhappy.

Finally Padmé shook her head and tightened the grip her arms had around his neck. Cuddled closer into him. Rubbed promisingly against his cheeks.

“My sister isn’t helping quite in the way I imagined she would,” was the cryptic answer he received.

Anakin’s eyebrows furrowed, confused. Gently he caressed her upper arm with his thumb, waiting to hear more of an explanation. But his other hand still held her to the wall. Carefully continuing his movements. Dipping down to her neck and tasting freely with his famished lips.

“She’s very critical,” Padmé clarified.

Her head fell back with a sudden murmur of “Oh Anakin,” even though Sola obviously had her worried. Anakin let his breath go in relief. Padmé turned her head and rested her cheek against his shoulder. Tightening the hold she had on him. Accepting him deeper into her body. Putting up that strong front, though he knew it wasn’t how she truly felt.

Trying to be reassuring, Anakin pressed deeper into her. Briefly rested his chin in the soft masses of curls that fell from the top of her head then grazed his chin over her cheek. Folding her into his loving embrace. She sighed overdramatically, but squeezed him briefly as they cuddled together.

“And the twins seem to be conspiring with her against me. Every time I go near them they scream.”

Anakin pulled back to look her in the eye. The twins upset when Padmé was near? Impossible. *I’ve been away for less than a week, how have the dynamics of our family changed so quickly?*

“Apparently I’m a terrible mother.”

He cupped her soft cheek in his palm. Needing to be in even more intimate contact with her. Hoping to be reassuring. Her worrying tugged at his mind more pressingly than the threat of Palpatine. Padmé wasn’t a terrible mother. Not by his standards. The twins loved her — if he knew anything with certainty it was that. Her anxiety flowed into him and suddenly he saw it all before him. The unique makeup of his own family that could never be fully understood by an outsider. The depressed mind of its matriarch.

“Padmé!” he laughed.

Throwing back his hair and catching her off guard. Leaning in and capturing her mouth. Their lips met, touching, softly caressing as Padmé coaxed him further into her soul. The

astonished gasps of her breath tickled wondrously against his cheek. His lips briefly trailed away from her mouth. Fluttering tiny kisses onto her nose.

"I haven't seen the twins in three days, but they don't hate you," he whispered.

Lovingly he dipped his head and sunk into her lips once more.

"Sola knows nothing about highly force sensitive little Jedi."

Padmé made a soft noise on inquiry.

"Let alone little Skywalkers."

Her fingertips floated up Anakin's back. Carefully cupped his strong features. Hopelessly lost in her soft caresses, he could only moan. Desperately he tried to catch his breath, but failed as she slipped her lithe hands up between the strands of his hair and held him close. All the while moving even closer into him.

"They're responding to you," he tried to explain around their kisses, only vaguely aware that there was anything else in the universe besides Padmé.

For a moment he gave up, losing himself in the taste of her. *Padmé* his heart sung, happily consoled after days of loneliness.

"She's aggravating you. When the twins feel you're unhappy, it makes them upset. So — mmmph"

he forced himself to pull away. And the sight that greeted him was more glorious than sunrise over the lake. Padmé's dark eyes just opening, sparkling with life. Her pink lips glistening as she reached up for more. He put up a hand to stop her, a minute shiver shooting through his body as she delicately kissed each of his fingers. Driving him to love her harder, though he knew they didn't have time. Still, his desire was irrepressible. Starved lips unerringly found the satin softness of her neck. Voracious as he covered her sensitive skin with his mouth. Groaning quietly as she gathered him in her arms and urged him on.

"Don't let her remarks upset you," Anakin offered his only advice.

Muffled from the depths of her neck.

"What makes Leia and Luke happy is being in your arms and knowing you're happy."

Padmé gave a soft sigh, turning away from him slightly so he was forced to pull away.

"You say that very confidently," she noted with a loving smile.

The one he knew was reserved only for him. Anakin's features softened as he studied her, wondering how he'd ever thought he was alive before he'd become her husband.

"It's the same thing that makes me happy."

The radiant smile Padmé gave him stirred all the blissful feelings he'd ever experienced.

"If Sola is making you *unhappy*, then tell her to leave," he commented bluntly.

Leaning forward he tried to take her lips once more. Finding that he met her cheek instead.

"She's here to help me," Padmé tersely reminded.

With an apologetically wry grin he took her hands and drew them around to his chest. Claspings them firmly.

“You’re the one who had twins a month ago. The senate is what’s important to you, Sola should understand that and try to make things easier, not make you doubt yourself as a parent.”

His words were becoming more disjoint. Hurried as he held her beneath him and fought desperately to please her.

“A *good* parent,” he murmured softly, leaning down and brushing his nose over her ear.

Padmé’s eyes slid shut and her body shuddered around him. Her face buried in his neck as she cried out. Bringing his own climax to the fore. They held together for the moment longer they could spare, then slowly drew apart. Anakin solemnly glued his eyes to Padmé’s. Knowing he had to leave, that Obi-Wan would already be suspicious.

“Luke and Leia want you and me to be near them more than anyone else.”

With one last, long look he dipped in for a final kiss.

Padmé’s arms were almost strangling him as they held fast to his neck.

“Please don’t go.”

Her soft begging sob tore at his heart. It was a moment of weakness for her, but it was exactly what he’d always wished she’d say. With desperation his hands raked over her back. Desperately clasping, searching for a hold. Unable to pull her closer, but trying anyway.

“I don’t want to,” he agonised.

Their mouths connected and pulled apart. Lips crashing together then pulling away again. Hungry half-kisses interspersed, landing frantically on their necks and shoulders. He tried to block out the sound of her desperate whimper and cry of “no!” as he withdrew himself from her. His own features screwed up at the pain that swept through him.

“Come back to me,” she whispered against his ear as he ripped himself from her arms.

He closed his eyes, swallowed, and turned back to the love of his life. Wondering how yet again he was leaving her. Making sure she understood he replied

“Always.”

And disappeared just as the front door opened.

When her sister walked in she was leaning against the wall, dishevelled and panting. She could still feel the whispering caress of his lips over hers as they made love in the shortest period she’d ever experienced.

“Padmé — are you alright?” Sola cried out.

Padmé was almost numb from the frenzied haste of their intimacy. The feeling of him pulsing remained as if he were still buried inside her. Her rapture continuing still as fingers of the force pressed eagerly at her. But she waved Sola off.

Out of the corner of her eye a Jedi fighter dipped its wing as it screamed past the window, heading back for the temple.

Chapter 15

Chapter Fifteen

As Artoo confirmed that their jump vector was set, Anakin did a final check in with his squadron commander. Once all was secure, his eyes turned downward to the capital planet below. Telling himself it wouldn't be the last time he set eyes on it. He *would* return. With that in mind, his hand slowly pulled back on the hyperdrive lever. Watching as the stars around them started to streak past.

Once it became dizzying he did the only really possible in a small fighter — close his eyes. Especially as this was a long jump. To think. About the upcoming battle with Palpatine. The fight he knew he'd have to engage in with his old friend. The one-to-one combat he was sure it would come down to. He didn't want to fight him, it didn't seem right to attack the mentor whom he had trusted for so long. Especially when that same man had pushed him into close quarters with Padmé. Even if that was some years ago now.

Anakin tried to remember the plot to destroy the Jedi. The entire fabricated war that was slowly being revealed. The millions of lives lost, the collapsed government, the *manipulation* of himself that Palpatine had so cleverly orchestrated. And yet all he could remember was that this was the only person who had listened to his grievances for almost a decade of his life. The only person who hadn't criticised him continually. The man who had convinced Padmé to take him to Varykino and let him kiss her, and touch her, and long for her until she couldn't help but love him.

"How can I kill him R2?"

He moaned to his electronic companion not really expecting a reply. But like everything else the droid had an opinion on this too. The string of beeps and whistles made him look to his side in surprise. As the data descended in a constant stream, so too did his mood. R2's evidence hit the mark. Reminded Anakin of *exactly* why Palpatine had to die. His mechanical fist clenched tight within its dark glove.

The list. He'd forgotten about the list. Windu had mentioned it but Anakin hadn't thought to follow it up.

"Where did you get this?"

He listened intently as his friend relayed tapping into the databases of both the Senate and the Jedi. Had downloaded the list of Senators the Chancellor planned on assassinating. Cross-referenced it with Palpatine's preferred methods of murder. And come up with this prediction of horror for the moment an Empire was declared.

If he hadn't taken Padmé away to Naboo — his head pounded as he fought off the building rage.

Not only had Palpatine helped to make him a husband. He had planned to make him a widower. For a moment Anakin's heart reflexively clenched at the thought of her being

injured. Let alone — *No!* he quickly stopped himself. *Don't even think it!*

He would not lose his most cherished of titles — he would not! Husband was something Padmé had declared him, and no one else could take it away. Nor would he lose the other most important definition of who he was. Palpatine would never deny him fatherhood. Leia and Luke would be safe, he would make sure of it the most definitive way he knew.

None of Palpatine's past friendship could make up for the harms he was most likely to commit. No one tried to hurt Anakin Skywalker's family. Not without incurring his wrath.

After another day of slurs, an uncomfortable dinner, and the second evening in a row retreating to the refuge of her bedroom, Padmé had come to thoroughly agree with Anakin's proposal.

Sola had to go.

What she loved about her sister was her honesty and companionship. The honesty had followed her to Coruscant but the deep friendship that had once lived between the sisters seemed to have been left behind on Naboo.

Her life was hard enough already. She had to dedicate her time to the fallen Republic. She wanted to dedicate as much time as she could to her — their beautiful children. She was struggling not to spend all her time thinking of Anakin. And she didn't need to be abused every free moment she had to herself.

Padmé had *thought* that Sola was coming to share her joy. Not work to undermine and destroy it. And it had taken Anakin's determined words to get through to her what she had already observed. Being upset about it only frightened the twins. No one was benefiting from Sola's company. So it was time she left.

After a frosty breakfast, Padmé stood stiffly from the table. Refusing to even meet Sola's cool gaze.

"Dormé could you help me in my room please?"

The dark-haired handmaiden rose from her side and silently followed. Discreetly shutting the bedroom door behind them. Trailing behind to the library of clothing into which Padmé had already fled.

What is it that is making Sola so heartless? Padmé wanted to weep, longing for the companionship of the sister who had shared her life. Does she truly think I am that incompetent with the twins? Padmé mused that perhaps her struggle to hide her feelings for the lover she ached for had spilled over and made her detached from their little ones. Or is it that she knows she is not the most important person in my life anymore? And is bitter because of it.

Unfortunately, knowing Sola, that was the most likely scenario. And in Padmé's mind that sunk her sister in her esteem. She determinedly turned her attention away from her thoughts and towards her handmaiden. Making sure the door was firmly closed and they'd have no eavesdroppers, she started doing what she did best. Work towards a practical solution.

“We need to start interviewing carers for the twins. *Immediately*,” the confident Senator stressed.

Hoping it didn’t seem too obvious how distressed she was. How much she was bordering on hating her sister.

Dormé withdrew a small data chip from the folds of her dress. Handed it over to her mistress with little ceremony and a sly smile.

“I’ve contacted a number of agencies on Naboo, and selected out the most recommended men and women.”

There was a stunned look on the young mother’s face. Before she smiled for the first true time since her husband had left. In a loud exclamation she yelped

“Dormé!”

before spontaneously hugging her handmaiden. Dormé took the selected dress from Padmé’s hand and began undoing the clasps.

“How did you know?” Padmé enthused.

The datareader next to her bed was snagged and activated, allowing Padmé to scroll through the relatively short list. Dormé had obviously done her homework, these people were all more than qualified. And she intended to meet with them all personally so as to choose the best one. After all, this person would be spending time with her precious children.

“Forgive me m’lady but — your sister...”

Dormé trailed off but she had already said enough. Padmé almost felt relieved that someone else could see how critical, how *rude* her sister was being. It wasn’t just her perceptions as the target, then. *At least Dormé sees it too*. Padmé nodded, knowing enough had been said between them.

“I’d like to interview all of these people, but discretion is going to be a most admirable quality in this circumstance. Could you arrange for the most trustworthy candidates to be transported to Coruscant please?”

“Of course.”

She handed the dress back to Padmé.

“If you don’t need my assistance m’lady, I’ll do it right now.”

They shared a knowing grin, both understanding that Padmé needed no help getting dressed this morning. That Padmé had only used that as a ruse to have a more private conversation with her confidant.

“Thank you Dormé,” she was sincerely grateful. “Could you order my transport for half an hour from now? I’d like to get into my office early this morning.”

“Yes m’lady.”

Padmé sat behind her Senate office desk feeling very strange indeed. Last time she'd sat here had been — when? Her mind drifted back but couldn't recall. Giving up she activated the terminal on her desk, finding the last message she'd read months ago still flashing on it. Her lips unavoidably stretched into a fond smile. *Oh!* She quietly exclaimed, skimming those few lines that had set her heart aflutter back then. 'Skywalker and Kenobi rescue Chancellor' the news brief's headline read.

Now she remembered. Sitting here contemplating Grievous' attack on Coruscant. Trying to redraft a proposal that would curb the Chancellor's personal control over the Senate. *Not as ridiculous an idea as some claimed* she dryly admitted to herself. And then that alert had popped up. Informing that her reckless Anakin had just crashed back onto the planet and into her life. Her heart started pounding again as she felt the same joy, fear, anticipation she had then. She'd barely had time to shut the terminal down before she'd wrapped herself in a cloak and fled unaccompanied to the Senate landing platforms where an hour later he'd finally be pressed into her arms again.

"Oh Anakin," she smiled secretively to herself.

She was sitting here once again, but life was even more beautiful. For the first time in their lives they'd finally just been married. Spent their days together and shared one another's company. He'd given her his first child and she'd given him twins.

And the Republic had hit rock bottom. No longer would she allow it to fall, stand by while that kind of tyranny flourished. Anakin may be saving the twins from the influence of an evil Sith Lord, but what she was doing would one day be even more pivotal.

He was ridding their future of evil. But for them she was re-establishing the great Republic. Although she wasn't naïve enough to believe it would give them lives of peace. Still, they would never live through a war like their parents had. Neither of them would know what it was to live for weeks, months, not knowing your partner's fate, let alone their touch. *That* she could ensure for them.

A knock at her door made her look up from her thoughts.

"Mon," she greeted warmly.

Standing, she greeted the smiling Chandrillan representative. They kissed cheeks as old friends and exchanged pleasantries. Padmé explained her absence as health-related, nothing more, when the redhead inquired, and then they moved on.

"You probably haven't heard but there's a re-drafting —"

Padmé grabbed her data pad and held it up grinningly.

"Of the Constitution? I was reading the reform committee's draft last night."

"I shouldn't have expected any less," came the friendly reply.

Padmé began flicking through the document, looking for a section she'd highlighted in her review the evening before. When Luke had been quietly gurgling by her side, his sister tucked up in her bed, and his aunt firmly locked out of their private room.

"Did you find anything strange about —?" Padmé began, only to be cut off by an inquiring

“Section 38a? Yes. The war crimes tribunal in the hands of the Chancellor alone was an odd change when it was made, but it makes no sense to leave it in now.”

“Exactly,” Padmé enthusiastically agreed. “With hindsight its obvious Palpatine made the change to secure his own freedom should he ever be caught. A single Chancellor is much easier to threaten and coerce into freeing him than an entire voting Senate.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

The two women settled into the lounge facing the spectacular view of the Government district. Padmé’s mind was already lost in thoughts of political manoeuvring. Who could be swayed to their side, and who had already been swayed by the ex-Chancellor. How they could oppose this section without discounting the good in the newly constructed constitution.

Darkness. Deep, oppressive darkness pressed at his mind like his skull was trapped in a vice. It threw him into consciousness a moment before R2 made a noise to wake him.

This is how Coruscant used to feel he painfully remembered. His shoulders shook at the memory. That feeling of always struggling had been there so long he’d barely been able to identify it. *But being away with Padmé* his mind showed him the autumnal fields behind her palace, where the darkness had leached out of him. Where he’d lain with his head in her lap and absorbed more than the warm sunshine. Where all the love and light of the force had slowly set him free. And it had taken getting away from Palpatine to discover how that could feel again. Something he’d completely forgotten.

“Ready R2?”

The small astromech popped up a small quip about always being ready. But the affirmative whistle from his companion came exactly as expected. Without much fuss he pulled back on the hyperspace lever. Watching as Geonosis came to fill the view in front of his cockpit.

And instead of that slow, clenching feeling, it hit him like a wave. Almost physically throwing him back into his headrest. But definitely slamming into him. Painfully.

“Ready for action *Poster boy*?” a jovial voice quipped through his headset.

Anakin turned to look out to his side. Looking directly into Obi-Wan’s fighter as it pulled up alongside. He seemed unaffected. Smiling, actually. Like he wasn’t even ware of it.

“Obi-Wan?”

Even getting those words out hurt. He took a moment to control his breathing. Drag deep breaths in and out of his lungs.

Focus on Padmé he tried to remind himself. In his mind he pictured how she felt in the force. How readily she listened to other people’s opinions. How calm and collected she was. Even when her young twins kept her up all night with their insistence on her attention. That brought a smile to his face. An irrepressible one that quirked the corners of his lips the more he pictured it.

The darkness stopped crushing him.

Padmé standing on the balcony looking out over the lake.

His breathing evened out.

Her curls carefully braided down her back as they had been often in the days before the twins were born. Catching the sun and throwing out a multitude of different colours.

The tenseness in his muscles began to loosen.

Leia curled against her chest in a warm little ball.

That thought was so filled with sweetness it pushed the darkness away. Started slipping off of him instead of seeping into his skin.

Luke as a nuzzling lump in the crook of his own elbow. Striding towards the person who made him complete. Who made him wish he could spend all his days by her side. In his mind he slipped his arm around her shoulders. His eyes shuddering closed as she and their daughter pressed lightly against him. That soft smile of absolute contentment drifted up onto her lips. The one he knew he brought out in her.

A ball of light erupted from his small fighter. Shafts of pure energy pierced the dark murky cloud that was the force surrounding Geonosis.

His eyes snapped back open. His grin even wider now.

“Oh yes my love,” he murmured to himself.

“Anakin?” Obi-Wan asked.

Oops. He’d forgotten his friend. Shaking his head he acknowledged that thoughts of his family could be very — engaging.

“I’m ready,” he assured the Master.

Knowing from Obi-Wan’s blasé response that he was unaware of the stirrings in the force. The lack of communication from any of the other Jedi who were appearing around them made it obvious. Anakin was the only one who could perceive it.

No wonder we didn’t find him out for so many years. They’re all blind. His happiness couldn’t be repressed, and a bubble of pure force energy encased his fighter. I was blind too he reminded. I still would be, if we hadn’t gotten pregnant all those months ago.

It could almost be determined the design of the force. To have Padmé falling pregnant just when the state of the universe most needed to be revealed to him. And it was almost plausible as the force’s will. *Except my hunger for her is so irrepressible, that the only amazing happening is that we didn’t accidentally make a baby before now.*

Anakin sent out a caress across the universe to his love. Then he pressed his heart and his most precious concerns to the depths of his soul. Where Palpatine wouldn’t be able to touch them. Or use them to torment him in a one-to-one confrontation. Which he had a bad feeling was probably coming. They would be his strength; he would not let them, let *her* be used as his vulnerability.

He flipped at switches, powering up his weapons systems.

“Fall into formation,” Windu’s voice came over the com.

And the battle rush of adrenaline flooded into his veins.

It’s odd the things you remember Padmé quietly mused. Her stride confident as she made her way out to the landing bays to meet Bail Organa. Even though her face betrayed nothing, her eyes had flickered to one of the ornate pillars.

Where months ago she had eagerly anticipated Anakin’s return.

Jumping out of my skin more like it she acknowledged to herself.

Thinking of him made her skin flush. Her heart quicken. Her fingers tingle for the feeling of him beneath them. She felt warm all over as she remembered him bolting across the floor towards her.

The secret she carried almost threatened to burst out. The eagerness to sing that he loved her washing over out of nowhere. He’d looked so handsome in that moment.

Bail’s shuttle drifted to a stop and she forced herself to stop dwelling on Anakin. As pleasant shivers still travelled up and down her spine like his fingers were wont to do. Carefully she turned all her attention to her colleague. Watching him disembark with a smile of anticipation as her mind turned to the senate and just who would be a good replacement candidate.

“Senator Amidala,” he warmly greeted.

Watching him bow politely, she dipped her own head in return. Happy to find that her list of those she could still trust in the senate could be increased by one.

“We were so worried.”

This wasn’t the first time someone had inquired about her whereabouts today. At least his probe was more subtly crafted. But like the others he would only get the most basic of excuses. Padmé was adept at the game of politics — trust only yourself with your true secrets was the number one rule and she wouldn’t trust anyone with her pleasant change in life. That, *they* were for private enjoyment. In Anakin’s company only.

She gave Alderaan’s Prince a small explanation of “forgive me, I had a family issue that required my presence” and nothing more.

“It is good to see you.”

Padmé gave her own friendly greeting and turned back towards their offices. Organa trailing behind her.

“Do you think the Jedi will be able to capture Palpatine?” Bail asked.

Turned their conversation to the most hotly debated topic on Coruscant today. Padmé thought of her own Jedi, the way his light hair curled into the nape of his neck as he’d promised her “Always” the last time she saw him. Then she thought of his skill with a

lightsaber. The way he'd deflected every bolt that came their way in that arena on Geonosis. And knew the answer to Bail's question.

"Perhaps not capture, I fear he will resist. In this case though, I have no doubt that the Jedi will prevail."

Bail nodded, then tentatively added

"I heard a rumour that Skywalker has returned. If anyone can produce a victory, it's him."

Padmé winced. She hoped she was only *reading* an association between the two of them into it, but somehow she didn't think so.

"He is a great warrior. There is a sitting tomorrow to discuss amendments, have you looked over the draft constitution?" she steered the conversation back to neutral territory.

They approached the Chandrillan offices and Bail waited for Padmé to precede him. She stepped forward, moving inside with her attention fully on the re-drafting. But along the top of her ear there was an echo of a faint caress. Of long, eager fingers fervently brushing over the sensitive skin that crowned her ear, just as they did when she leant in to kiss him.

Anakin.

Once they had landed on the rock planet, the Chancellor once again showed himself to be crafty, arrogant. He'd situated his control room in the midst of civilian housing. Knowing the Jedi would not sacrifice innocent non-combatants, even when the demise of the Sith was the prize. The galaxy's defenders had split into teams of two, sensing he was nearby but not able to pinpoint the location. Obi-Wan and Anakin had naturally paired off, months of separation coming to naught. A dark cloud surrounded the entire area effectively dulling their ability to hone in on him. But Anakin knew. Like a nexu following the scent of it's pray he weaved his way through an intricate set of pathways. Obi-Wan following questioningly.

"You could not possibly know where he is," he refuted.

"I picked the planet didn't I?" Anakin tossed back.

His feet moving very determinedly.

"True," Obi-Wan acknowledged.

The bearded master's hand slipped down to his belt. Retrieving not the hilt of his lightsaber but a tiny comlink from one of his pouches. Waiting to com the others of their location if Anakin truly did locate the Sith Lord.

The younger knight knew better. Their communications had been dampened the moment they split up, and no one would be coming to assist them. This battle had been planned before he was born. The Chosen One and the Sith Lord were meant to face one another, and only now was the force's son ready.

He just hoped Obi-Wan would still be his friend, should they survive the fight.

No he told himself firmly. *I won't do that to Padmé. I won't leave her, and I won't leave without her.*

Their pace sped, coming to an all out run as Anakin felt the Chancellor's presence growing more powerful. The force was guiding him to his destiny and Obi-Wan was following with only blind trust that Anakin knew what he was doing. Anakin stood tall, proud as they entered a vast chamber at the end of a dimly lit hallway. Because he did know what he was doing. He was connected to the force in a way no other Jedi could perceive. He had the quiet awareness protecting his heart that Padmé would drop everything to be with him. That Leia and Luke were waiting on Coruscant for him to cuddle up with them. And that when he was finished here, when the Chancellor was gone, he would still have people who loved and cared for him unconditionally.

"An-a-kin," a familiar voice greeted.

That same, caring tone that had always relaxed him. Made him feel wanted, and important. It almost still did.

He wanted to kill Padmé he reminded himself. No matter what the Sith lord said, that fact remained. He had to keep it at the forefront of his mind and not forget.

"Palpatine," he greeted casually.

His dark cloak fell from his shoulders with a single shake. Obi-Wan's hitting the floor simultaneously. Complementary lightsabers drew into their palms, remaining unignited. Like the professional team they were, Anakin circled to the left of the darkened window. Where the Sith Lord stood surveying his battleground, the last of the droid troopers being bombarded by clone forces. The Jedi Master moved to the right. Ensuring the battle of Jedi and Sith would end here, today.

Palpatine gestured to where the winged natives were aiding the fight against republican forces.

"Did you ever wonder why the Geonosians are such good warriors?" he questioned thoughtfully.

So it's going to be like this the Chosen One commented to himself. Remembering all the kindly chats he'd had with this man for more than a decade. The discussions that had shaped who he was to some degree. The only person he'd been able to talk to about the forbidden feelings he had — the growing want to stand beside Padmé.

The Sith lord had chosen the same path that their conversations had always taken. A philosophical question to expose the Chancellor's wisdom. Only this time it wasn't wisdom. And only now did Anakin truly understand that it probably never had been.

The old man didn't flinch a centimetre as Anakin and Obi-Wan drew closer.

All of them knew his words had almost nothing to do with the prowess of Geonosian warriors.

"It never crossed my mind," Anakin smoothly replied.

The old man laughed as if Anakin was making a truly hilarious joke, then replied

“No, I’m not surprised. Their adolescents are left out on the barren plains at the first sign of maturity. Only those that can make their way back to the settlements survive.”

Anakin saw Obi-Wan reach for his comlink, quietly speak into it, then put away the device in disgust. Communications blackout. Just as he’d predicted.

“It’s a good thing for *Senator Amidala* that the Naboo have no such practice. I fear she would be most upset to put her child through such a vigorous physical test at such a young age.”

A bright blue blade ignited. Snapped on so quickly that even Obi-Wan was surprised. Anakin, however, understood perfectly the subtext of the Chancellor’s words. He was saying he knew about Padmé’s child. And their marriage. And Palpatine had the nerve to try to use it as leverage for Anakin. The threat that his children would be taken away from him.

He tried to kill Padmé he repeated silently. *He’s not to be trusted.*

“Surrender quietly Palpatine and you won’t be harmed,” Obi-Wan tried to be diplomatic.

Always the Negotiator Anakin laughed to himself. Knowing Palpatine would never surrender. To anyone, He probably still thought his Empire was viable. Palpatine ignored him, brushed him off as if he were a mere insect. Continued to his story as if no other words had been uttered.

“Of course, her child would most likely survive any test thrown in its path.”

Outside a troop carrier full of clones was blasted by a missile and started falling to the ground in a ball of fire.

“I suspect that its physical prowess will be quite astounding by adolescence.”

The Sith Master turned away from the increasingly smoke-filled battle field. To peer cruelly at Anakin.

“It is, after all, the offspring of a powerful Jedi.”

His insinuation was clear. And Anakin put both hands to his sabre. Hearing the leather of his glove squeak as he gripped the hilt tightly. Seeing Obi-Wan’s ignite from the corner of his eye.

“Her husband would be disturbed to hear you say that,” Anakin retorted.

Leaping at the last word towards the aging Sith. Hoping that his ‘truth from a certain point of view’ answer was enough to at least temporarily allay any doubt Obi-Wan had. If only long enough so they could win this last battle together and come out alive. Then he let go his conscious self and sunk into the gentle currents of the force. Letting it direct him to move and meet Palpatine’s red Sith blade as it sprung from his robes. Trusting it to steer him in the right direction, just as months ago he had trusted it to protect Padmé, their baby, and himself.

Obi-Wan could not ignore what the Chancellor was implying. It wasn’t a million parsecs from what he himself had suggested to Anakin. But the force willed him to let it go. To address what was important. The future of not only the Jedi order. But the entire galaxy. The

destruction of the Sith and the malevolent shadow it cast over each and every being that lived under its control.

Not the paternity of Senator Amidala's child.

His inner battle to try and relinquish this partial confirmation of his suspicions didn't happen quickly enough. It distracted him. Enough that he never saw the duct the Chancellor ripped free of the wall. And heard the force warning to late to duck, as it made contact with the back of his head and knocked him out cold.

Leaving the Chosen One to fight his greatest battle alone.

Anakin felt Obi-Wan's drop out of the fight. Reflexively he reached out with the force, just enough to feel that his master's life force was thriving, if not conscious. To reassure himself it was nothing a few days floating in a bacta tank wouldn't fix. The momentary distraction left him vulnerable. And when he returned his full attention to the Emperor he found nasty whispers of the darkside trying to pierce him.

His desperation to find his footing as quickly as possible was luring him to use its malevolent power.

Quick and easy but not fulfilling! Padmé! he reminded himself. Thinking of his head resting in her lap as they stretched out in a meadow of flowers.

His bubble of light bounced back to fullness. The dark thorns flicked away. Not left with a single chance to attack again.

Padmé was engrossed. Documents that concerned not only Naboo's future but that of the Republic too covered her desktop. She wanted to be absolutely prepared when they attended the sitting tomorrow. The new constitution they were to debate had to leave no holes like the last one had. No room for anyone to take power so completely. The future of the galaxy and its trillions of beings depended on it.

"Knock knock," a voice sung from the doorway.

Padmé glanced up, surprised to be interrupted. Her handmaidens knew when she was in her home study she was not to be disturbed. For anything. But this was no handmaiden.

"Sola?" she asked in disbelief.

Quickly she abandoned her work and was on her feet.

"What's wrong? Is it Luke or Leia?" she frantically demanded.

"No no," her sister assured leisurely.

The elder sibling settled comfortably into the chair across from her desk.

"They're asleep. I just thought we could have a chat."

A wave of relief washed through Padmé. They were ok, that was all that truly mattered. Then she stopped. She was deeply involved in the workings of the Senate. In bringing a peaceful end to a bloody coup. In preventing the remnants of the war from flaring up. And Sola wanted to have a *chat*?

Her breath still hadn't returned to normal. Scaring her about their little ones was the one thing she wasn't ready to handle.

"I'm busy right now. I'll come talk to you later," she assured.

It was an effective means of dispensing with anyone who disturbed her. Especially when she was working. It was polite, but firm, indicating she needed to get back to work.

Sola, apparently, wasn't so skilled at reading a subtle hint as Padmé remembered.

"With what? Senate documents? I want to talk about *you*. Are you finding it hard with the lack of sleep? Does your body hurt? Do you feel like you're bonding with them? Because it really doesn't seem that way. Maybe it's because you're on your own."

Padmé grit her teeth and forced herself to stay silent. Just long enough to try and get out some sort of civil reply.

"Do you wish their father had stayed around?"

Don't. Think. About Anakin she ordered herself. But it was too late. His deep blue eyes were piercing her from her memory. His voice telling her and only her that the Sith Lord was waiting on a planet they'd both already almost died on. *No!* she stopped herself before her consciousness could wander too far down that path. Instead focusing on how annoying her sister could be.

Why couldn't she understand that Padmé simply didn't want to talk about it? She hated to think how heartbreaking it would be to be pestered by these questions if the twins had actually been fathered by some one-night stand.

"Sola I don't have time for these questions. There is a very important hearing tomorrow and I've got to prepare. Can I talk to you later?"

Instead of acquiescing with her wishes Sola stubbornly refused to be polite. Or even amiable.

"No, the twins are asleep, I want to talk now. Your work can wait."

"My work *cannot* wait."

This time the Senator's tone was clearly laced with irritation.

"Leave me be, Sola. We will speak later."

And with that dismissive finality she picked up a datapad and began reading again. Leaving no room for argument. Making it clear she had no time to continue on the conversation with her sister.

Darred looked up as his wife emerged from her sister's study. They were both so worried about her, it would be nice if she took the offer of opening up and talked to Sola. But from the look on her face, he didn't hold too much hope.

"Well?"

Her dark head shook sadly.

A silent understanding passed between them, one that could only be gained through years spent bonding with a single person. Sympathy and shared concern for one of their family members.

Darred watched his wife cross the room and lifted his arm so she could join him on the divan. She tucked herself up under his arm, as she had done many a night before, and then looked out quietly over the buzzing metropolis.

He knew she had something to say, and gave her some space and time to order her thoughts. Waiting for her to speak first.

"I just don't know," Sola finally broke the silence.

"She barely spends any time with them, she's so engrossed in her work. Her priorities are all twisted up."

The worried elder sibling took her husband's hand and led it down her side, finally pulling to a stop at her waist where she could play with his fingers.

"I don't even understand where she found the time to meet this one night stand. Or give him a night of her time. Because she gives all of those to the Republic too."

He wasn't stunned to hear this kind of talk, he'd been hearing it for a few days now, but it still seemed so out of character with the Sola who loved her sister. But before he could protest she continued on with

"And why is it the one thing she allows to pass her by without commitment is a partner?"

"That's a little harsh don't you think?" he attempted to rein in her temper.

"She barely notices them! I wonder if she'd even know they were alive if she didn't have to feed them. We've all wanted a family for her, but not like this. Not something she manages to squeeze in at the end of her day."

"You wanted her to experience what you have," he clarified.

"Exactly!" The exasperated older sister confirmed.

"But she's not you. Just like you can't understand what it is to put work first, above all else, its possible Padmé doesn't and probably never will understand what it is to put love and family above all else."

Had Padmé been within earshot, both Darred and Sola would have been severely reprimanded. Had her husband been there to stand up for her, his tongue would most definitely have slipped from silence in her defence. And had her children have understood, the naïve couple may have gotten just a glimpse of the sacrifices even Padmé refused to make in the name of the Republic. But since all four Skywalkers were otherwise engaged, building

a Republic, battling a Sith Lord, and gaining the desperately needed sleep their little bodies craved, no one revealed the truth of Padmé's life to them.

So instead they continued to discuss what could be done to make her stop, even for a just a moment.

Without knowing that Padmé had spent the last four months indulging her heart.

They were just deciding to head off to bed when there a muted cry sounded from Padmé's bedroom. Darred glanced to his exhausted wife, who had already spent most of the day running around after the twins. With a slight quirk of a smile he placed a quick kiss on her cheek and pushed her towards their bedroom.

"You go to bed, I'll join you in a little while," he promised.

Turning for the master suite with the knowledge that their mother hadn't emerged from behind her desk in almost four hours.

Once the door had swooshed open before him and he'd made his way to the gleaming twin bassinets, it was Luke who revealed himself to be awake.

"Hello hello," his uncle greeted, lifting the baby into his arms.

He quickly left to go into the living room so Leia wouldn't wake as well before trying to soothe the little boy. Who had other ideas. His little lungs wouldn't settle, no matter how much Darred tried to calm him. He wasn't hungry, he didn't need to be changed, he didn't want to be held nor put down. Even Luke's favourite form of entertainment — turning the holoprojector on and getting it to feed one of the more tiresome news channels — didn't work.

"Come on Luke," he begged as the twenty-minute mark passed.

His nephew refused.

Darred caught a glimpse of footage of Jedi battling on an inhospitable looking planet as he bounced around the room.

"Lucky bastards," he muttered beneath his breath.

"I bet you'd stop crying for a Jedi, wouldn't you Luke?" he teased.

The sounds didn't stop. In fact, did Luke just get louder or was that his tired imagination playing cruel tricks on him?

"This is why your father needs to be here," Darred pointedly told the upset infant. "So he can look after you while mama works."

And just like that the noises stopped. For a split second he thought his mind was playing tricks on him. He turned to look at where the little head rested on his shoulder, knowing it was too good to be true. To find a pair of infant blue eyes locked onto the holo.

Darred focused his own attention back on the projector. To see the image of the Jedi's familiar hero ending the Outer Rim sieges a few months ago. Although this was old footage, apparently the tall Jedi was reported to have just left on an important mission.

Shaking his head at the oddity of his baby nephew's behaviour, that *this* was what made him calm down to the point he was happy again, he glanced into the clearing blue orbs resting on his shoulder.

A tiny hand stretched out from where it was curled into its side, reaching for the image of the impressive fighter in battle. And Darred glanced back to suddenly find himself faced with the exact same pair of eyes. Staring out of the much more matured face of the Republic's greatest warrior.

Don't be ridiculous he reprimanded himself, shooting another quick look at Luke. Same eyes. *Exactly* the same.

"Nooooo," he tried to deny it.

It was too bizarre, too unthinkable. The same eyes meant nothing.

Even though our girls and Leia, their only cousin, all have dark Naberrie eyes he couldn't stop himself from noting. *No! It couldn't be! His father had blue eyes, that's all! There's no way it could be this Jedi! Padmé would never act like that!*

Darred was trying hard to convince himself that there was no way Anakin Skywalker, the most famous war hero, the poster boy for self-sacrificing duty and service, *the image of chastity for heaven's sake!* had fathered his newborn niece and nephew.

Luke wasn't being very helpful in his quest to put the unthinkable idea out of his head. Despite the last however many minutes of crying, he was now nuzzling into Darred's shoulder and happily babbling. His tiny fingers flexing like they did as they reached for a milk container with anticipating want. Wriggling like a mad little thing, kicking feet and all, so he could be nearer to the projection of light.

For a Jedi.

A blue eyed Jedi who joined Padmé in her seclusion. It's preposterous — isn't it?

The entertained noises of a newborn spoke otherwise.

Anakin roared, letting go his conscious self to the intensity of the fight. Blue eyes flashed, not to yellow like the Sith but to a deepening of their natural colour — until the blue was an intense crystalline. His body and mind became movements, quick and sure. Thoughts of his soul and her babies slipped from his head and the beast that had been caressed into sleeping by his love for her woke. Not angry, but frustrated at being caged for so long.

Eager to let loose.

Obi-Wan's saber jumped from across the room into his hand as he called it and took on Palpatine once and for all. For so monumental a fight, the end of all evil, it didn't take long.

They were evenly matched, both with fires of desire driving them to victory. The old man was angry, his fire lit by kindling and oil. The quick and intense fuel of hatred was nothing to the steady burn of loving desire that, conscious or no, powered Anakin's soul. And while the elder opponent wore himself out the younger fought with boundless strength, the force his

biggest supporter. In the quest to rid itself of the evil malevolence that made it bend and twist to his will, the force imbued its champion with every ounce of strength until finally it happened.

Like it had before.

Anakin was barely aware as the Chancellor fell at his feet, his arms laying as detached limbs on the floor.

“Don’t hurt me Anakin, I’m weak,” the lying scum tried to change tactics.

As Anakin slowly receded from the haze of battle, back to his normal perception of time, he found himself here. In the same place he’d been almost six months ago. A Sith Lord at his feet begging for mercy.

This time the Chancellor wasn’t the prisoner ordering him to be executioner. And for just a moment, Anakin paused. To make sure he wasn’t repeating his mistake. To make sure he wasn’t letting the intensity of the moment or someone else’s opinion guide him. Looking down into Sidious’ eyes, he didn’t see the shock and horror that had swum in Dooku’s startled irises. He didn’t see the acknowledgement of any remorse at all.

He saw malevolent, evil, hate. He saw the corruption of his children and the callous snuffing out of his guiding light. And in that moment, even the beast wasn’t in control. His hands sliced the two light swords in his hands across one another, and the decapitated body fell before him.

Dark energy sputtered out from it and he physically recoiled. Thrown to his knees by the strength of the blast as the Sith were finally banished from the universe. The ripples of it pounded through the force in a shockwave, and he screamed in agony as it shuddered through his body. But as soon as it started, it was finished. He held his head, trying to regain equilibrium. To remember who he was after all that had violated his body.

Jedi came running, amassing in the room. Either staring at him in disbelief or trying to assist Obi-Wan.

Anakin rose to his feet with the graceful prowess of a big cat. There hadn’t been enough darkness inside of him for some time to do any lasting damage. But he was thrown out of kilter by the trailing wake the Sith’s death had left. And like a Panther he stalked across the room. The almost fawning respect of Knights, Masters, even Council members, brought a growl emanating from deep within his throat, so low it barely registered in the human hearing range.

He ignored their words, their gestures, his shoulders shifting as he tracked across the control room and out its door. His concern for Obi-Wan existed but was irrelevant. The Jedi master would spend the next few days in bacta, and they would reunite on Coruscant then.

Right now he needed nothing from the Jedi. And he had given them his all. Destroyed their destroyer. With the speed of a Jaguar he tracked through the labyrinth of Palpatine’s control post. To the hanger bay. Back to his untouched fighter. Ignorant of the battle still being waged by Clones and Federation forces. Ignorant of the respect he’d always demanded now being given to him. Ignorant even of his own odd behaviour.

The beast had been called forth from within him to deal with the Sith. And it had yet to be quelled, agilely leaping into the starfighter. For to be truly satisfied, the beast had a single want. A Desire. A *need*.

At its heart the beast didn't want death. To be truthful it only wanted one thing.

It's mate.

Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen

Artoo continued to warble, trying to grab at his attention. Unfortunately for the astromech Anakin's mind wasn't even truly conscious. He entered commands into the main console to guide the ship but he wasn't aware of his surroundings, or even himself. All he knew was one thing — the image in his mind of Padmé.

The fighter pulled out of hyperspace over Coruscant and for the first time none of his usual carefully planned deception tactics to cover his true destination came out.

It was almost his downfall.

Word of the victory and his imminent return had travelled much faster on COM channels than he could ever hope to. It was the only explanation for what was waiting to greet him just above the planet's atmosphere.

An armada. Everything from the smallest of personal yachts to the big Corellian Cruisers that he'd spent countless weeks being ferried around in. All were circling the planet — denser than any asteroid belt. For just a moment, watching the small explosive charges they carried into the capital city's skyline, he froze. Not even when he'd been facing Palpatine had he felt this level of fear shuddering through him.

Padmé, and Leia and Luke! They're being attacked! They city is being shelled! They were supposed to be safe! I left only to protect them but I should have stayed... — they were the first conscious thoughts he'd had that went beyond mere images of his loved ones in hours.

The shell that surrounded Anakin had fallen away once Palpatine had been defeated. The interface between the internal essence of his being and the universe outside of it. It had left him knowing none of the protocols that surrounded the life of a Jedi. Knowing and caring little for the expectations people had of him, only understanding that to right the imbalance it felt, it had to find its way back to *her*.

A sheer wall of ships blocking his entry vector wasn't a task the inner essence could handle. Anakin slowly shook his head, hair brushing against his shoulders as he emerged from his single mindedness to take in what was going on.

As the full man returned so did the ability to fully comprehend a situation. The panic slowly receded as he realised what was going on. It wasn't a blockade or bombardment. The charges falling from their holds were dropping showers of sparks into the atmosphere. It was a celebration.

His gloved hand reached over and flicked an audio channel on to gain some clarity.

"A Jedi fighter just dropped out of hyperspace at coordinates one-six mark two-seven by three eight. Sources are trying to confirm it's Anakin Skywalker."

Wincing he threw a quick glance to his side and checked his coordinates. Yep. It was him. And now they were all rushing to make visual confirmation.

“I guess they know we’re here R2.”

He commented unnecessarily because it was obvious many of the little ships were turning to point their noses in his direction. Just to confirm they truly had been spotted one of the lights on his instrument panel began beeping. A call for identification from the Temple’s main hanger.

Jubilation seemed to be almost raining around him — he could literally see the pilots of nearby ships waving at him as they came dangerously close.

Despite the fact that he’d spent so much of his life searching for praise, and the last few years basking in the glory of hero-worship, right now he wanted none of it. He wanted none of their adulation because right now it was meaningless. The happiness of the Senator from Naboo was all he could think about at the moment.

That was what he truly wanted to see. To be with her and experience the elation of fulfilled promise his birth had promised to the galaxy.

“Disengage from the ring,” he ordered.

His fingers flew over the control panel, switches changing position as he fired up the sublight engines. When R2 had disabled the clamps on the hyperspace ring his hand reached out and grabbed the flight stick.

The small droid whistled question as Anakin started weaving his way through the adoring masses.

“No. I want to see Padmé. No politicians.”

*Well, except for **my** politician* the young Jedi smugly corrected himself. He pushed forward and the ship shot out from between its amassing fans. Making a break for the atmosphere and dangerously breaching it without any warning to Coruscanti traffic control. Luckily for him the entire Jedi council and most of the Order had their attentions focused on Geonosis still, because his finesse was nowhere to be seen. His fighter flashed around buildings and under transports as he brought it up to unfathomable speeds, betraying the desperation its pilot had to be *with* her.

Their apartment flashed up in front him in mere minutes. With dangerous precision he had the top open before the small craft had even reached the balcony. Artoo took over control without asking as the broad-shouldered Jedi somersaulted from the cockpit and took off running.

Anakin felt all the strength of emotion he’d buried welling up inside him. The familiarity of surroundings where he’d only ever felt love, spurred his pounding footsteps. That outer persona faded away for the moment with a startling flash of bright blue in his irises.

The security screens momentarily disabled as he rushed through into one of his most favourite places. Their bedroom. Here they’d spent many a night twined together, admitting just how deep their love for one another ran.

He paused for just a moment. Reaching out for the familiar presence of his lover. But she wasn't nearby and his body was practically screaming for her. *Need Padmé!* He stalked through into the living room totally forgetting that her sister had been staying when he left. Luckily the room was empty and their secret remained one. But that didn't go any way to assuaging the need that was fast becoming unbearable to contain.

She barely existed as a name or a form in his consciousness. His longing for her slowly descended into something more primitive than he could comprehend. It wasn't about the familiarity of her voice and the comfort of her words and kisses. It was a need for the other — *mate* his mind angrily growled.

"Master Anakin!" a surprised voice clanking in from the kitchen barely registered.

It wasn't Padmé, so what did it matter?

"How glad I am to see you sir! Mistress Padmé will be relieved you've returned, she's been quite worried."

"Where?" he growled.

Not even able to get out a complete sentence now. Threepio cocked that golden head at him in a non-verbal question but Anakin didn't have enough of his wits about him to elaborate any further. Until he could bond with his mate again, the drive to banish the incompleteness was overruling everything else.

It was an almighty struggle with himself to put together enough words. Enough for the droid to understand.

"Where is she?"

"Oh! Miss Padmé is still at the Senate I believe sir. We expect her home within two hours."

Helpful but not enough. The senate. He couldn't get into the Senate without being mobbed.

Padmé. Mate, lover, wife. Need.

Padmé was conversing excitedly with Mon Mothma in the Senate delegation offices of Fang Zar. The small group that had worked so tirelessly on the petition months before to relieve Palpatine of his power had collected themselves in the idealism of the Sern Sector's headquarters. And it was jubilation such as Padmé had never seen. For years the Senate had slowly been losing its power, until the culmination of Palpatine's reign. *Was that only weeks ago? It seems like Luke and Leia have been part of my life for so much longer, and yet it happened before they were born.*

The air in here lacked the crushing oppression which had so long lingered over them all. There was freedom, as if democracy itself had struck the winning blow against despotism.

They were all in session when the news had first broken. The drudgery of arguing over the constitution rewrite, and the hopeless feeling that maybe nothing would ever change, had all slipped away to nothing. The Republic was free. The people of the universe were free. And Leia and Luke would never know true fear. That of not knowing the mortal fate of a loved

one, even for a split second. Though the constitution had been abandoned for today, it would be taken up again tomorrow. And she felt resolve that it would one day be worked out. In the not too distant future.

Right now Palpatine was dead and the celebrations were outweighing even those that ended the trade-federation war on her homeworld.

And she was happier, more filled with hope, than any of them. Because maybe now, her young husband could finally be free of the doubts that plagued him.

A tiny part of herself even admitted how excited she was that it was him that had done this. It was *her* husband that had freed them all. *Her* Jedi Knight that had eliminated the final threat. Her mind could almost picture him destroying Palpatine, and like everyone her mind didn't show her the gruesome striking down of the fallen leader. Instead it was the confident warrior. Looking absolutely delicious.

She'd seen him fight on Geonosis before. She'd seen the images the holonet so much loved to repeat. Hell she'd even caught him practicing with his lightsaber on Naboo a few times when he thought he was alone.

You wait until you get home Anakin. You're going to find out just how sexy I think you are she silently promised him. A lascivious grin crept up onto her lips and refused to be repressed. Then she glanced at a chrono and did a quick calculation in her head. If Anakin moved at speeds just beyond the possibility for hyperspace travel, then he could be back within the hour. And even if he didn't come straight home, she wanted to be there the second he finally did, waiting for him.

The war was finally over. And they were going to celebrate.

With a jaunty end to the conversation with Senator Mothma, she quietly slipped out of the impromptu celebration. It was time to find her love... R.

Padmé's transport allowed her to disembark on the complex roof, and it was only a short ride down in the turbo lift with Captain Typho to her apartment.

She walked in to find Leia propped up in a baby seat and Luke in his aunt's arms, just finishing off the meal he'd been sucking.

"Oh Padmé isn't it wonderful?"

Sola eagerly greeted her from across the room but didn't make to leave her spot by the window. She was wistfully staring out at the colourful fireworks that exploded in the dusk sky.

"This is what I have been working for my whole life," the Senator admitted.

So eagerly that it took a moment for the words to register in her own mind. Yes. This was it. This was exactly what she had become involved for, though she'd never truly known it. Palpatine's malevolence, now removed, had lifted like a curtain to reveal the bright new day. And she hadn't even known she'd been trapped inside.

Darred gave her a bare nod of acknowledgement, his own face glued to the massing crowds below. The wistfulness that covered his face was almost childlike in its intensity.

“No Padmé, what you’ve been working for is these two little things right here. Compared to them this is irrelevant,” Sola corrected her with a brief glance down to Luke.

Then the eldest Nabberrie’s gaze returned to the outside world’s triumphal blaze. *Hypocrite* Padmé’s nerves grated. *I have been **working** for freedom from tyranny. The outcome of which you’re obviously yearning for right now! It is **not** irrelevant!*

Her anger spiked as she wondered why Sola continued to discount her work as nothing. Even when she could see the beautiful results spread out before her.

She loved her babies but when had they suddenly come to mean *everything* about her? Because she loved them, was she supposed to cease to exist? Stop loving her work, her life? Maybe her husband? Even her sister? Padmé’s insides smirked at the irony her own mind provided her. If Padmé truly loved nothing the way Sola reminded her she needed to love her children, then Sola herself would be irrelevant.

Soft fingers curled into her palm, digging her nails in. This wasn’t Leia or Luke’s fault but her heart was about to start blaming them unless she could get the perpetrator out of the house. Her babies were innocent, beautiful things and she did love them very much. A little time alone would be nice, now that she finally felt she had the time to spare.

And Anakin would be home soon.

“Why don’t you go out on your own for the evening and enjoy the celebrations?” she offered, putting aside her ire and genuinely hoping that they would have a nice night.

“Would you mind?” Darred jumped on the chance, already bolting across the room to fumble with his cloak.

“Not at all. Go, have a nice time.”

“Padmé, I’m not sure you can handle them all on your own,” Sola worried, refusing to relinquish Luke.

Not really making a move to go anywhere.

Control Padmé reminded herself. Sola looked like she’d rather kidnap Luke than leave him to his mother. *Take him back first* Padmé tried not to worry. Crossing the room she plucked her infant from her sister’s rather reluctant grasp.

“I am their mother. We will have our own little celebration.”

She hoped her assurance came out more genuine sounding than she felt.

Get out! her heart suddenly rebelled. Knowing that she was walking a very fine line towards her first all-out tantrum since she was five, Padmé made the biggest concession yet to finally be left alone.

“You have your com. I’ll contact you if there’s any trouble.”

It was worth it.

“Alright, contact us if you need *anything*,” Sola stressed.

Whose children are these?! She internally seethed but just nodded as Darred helped his wife into her cloak and then escorted her out the door. *Finally!*

A minute later she wasn't as confident. It had seemed such a good idea. A chance to see if she could cope on her own and finally escape her sister's unintentional but hurtful remarks. But the hours of her snide comments had begun to erode Padmé's self-assurance, and it was harder than she thought. She'd come to rely on their company. Especially with Anakin's absence.

Her ears perked for the sound of noise but — nothing. After the front door had closed behind Sola there was silence.

“It's just us,” she told the twins quietly.

She glanced down but neither of them seemed to see fit to break the quiet. Padmé's eyes closed for a brief moment. She truly was alone. She hated silence, and yet here it was. Especially since Luke and Leia hadn't stopped babbling since they were born.

“Why are you so quiet?” she teased.

She spread out a blanket on the floor and carefully laid them out side by side. Two innocent little faces stared up at her. She almost felt lonely with them refusing to talk.

“Come on,” she grinned, rubbing her nose at Leia's.

The little girl laughed and reached out, grabbing a fistful of hair.

“That's better,” she happily encouraged.

Carefully she disengaged the tiny fingers and pulled back a little. Capturing the miniscule socks on Luke's feet and pulling them away so she could tickle the bared soles. He started giggling too, reaching his small pudgy arms towards his mother who in return offered him a few fingers to grab hold of and suck.

Even Padmé herself couldn't hold back a laugh as they each tried to tug her down. Reaching their fingers for the inviting promise of her curly hair. For an hour the young mother simply played with her newborns. Touching their soft skin and absorbing their sweet soft sounds as never before. They truly did complete her like she'd once hoped just one of them would. Eventually, though, the little things started to get upset. And she understood it wasn't about her.

“Ok, sleep time.”

Padmé looked from the twins to her bedroom. Their small beds were still unmade since she'd hurried off this morning. And she could use a moment to herself.

“Threepio, could you watch them for me?”

“Of course Miss Padmé,” the faithful droid answered.

She nodded and clambered to her feet, confident in Threepio's abilities. The door to her bedroom slid up as she approached. And for a brief moment she was stunned into the

permeating silence that surrounded everything else. Then her senses returned and her face broke into a soft smile.

Stretched along her bed was one tall Jedi, fully clothed and fast asleep.

She'd done the sums in her head. It almost didn't seem possible that her wish for his return, safe and sound and immediately, would occur so quickly.

Happy to see him she settled on the bed by his side. In the living room the sound of Threepio babbling to Leia and Luke could be heard, but she let the sound waves drift over her ears without penetrating. All her attention was focused on one thing. Anakin was back. Her cheeks, already tinted pink from her constant laughing with their twins flushed red in excitement.

"Anakin," she quietly coaxed.

Padmé got comfy beside his strong body. Lovingly stroked his hair back from his relaxed features. Simply the feeling of him near enlightened her soul.

He made a mumbling noise then rolled his head. A pair of blue eyes slowly blinking open. They blazed with something beyond their normal warmth as soon as they settled on her. A startlingly brilliant blue.

Before she could even draw breath in surprise he had snapped awake. Instead of the sleepy smile she was used to he did something odd.

Grabbed her to him and flipped over. Their foreheads pressed together. And growled.

"Padmé," came out of him in a deep rumble.

Subtle tones of careful possession mixed with relief not particularly hidden. He loomed like a great threatening bear. But his weight had the comfort and offered the relief no one else could ever offer. Anakin was alright.

"Hello," she greeted, grinning up at him.

He clasped their hands and tugged her to him. Padmé's world felt completely full in that instant. Lips meeting in a soft touch. A lingering kiss of love. Her young lover's fingers eagerly stroking her own. Her two little children he'd fathered babbling wordlessly nearby. She quietly sunk into him, their kiss deepening as they remembered what it was to be near one another. Padmé soon pulled back a little, cuddling into his willingly accommodating form.

He barely withdrew, still too close for her to focus on his blurred form. His attentive lips drifted over her cheeks as he softly whispered

"S nice to be home."

Padmé slipped a leg between his. Giggled as he moved in closer and held her tight. He suddenly yanked his head back and looked deep into her eyes. A wide grin spread over his face. And that flashing blue began to fade, just a little, into something more normal. More *human*.

"You feel so good," he declared.

Padmé leaned into him. Brushed her fingers over his rough cheek. Touched his lips with hers once more.

“So do you,” she confided.

They kissed and hugged, and laughed until Threepio’s voice was drowned out by the sound of crying babies.

“I think it’s time for their sleep,” Padmé told him mischievously.

Her tongue traced the tip of his finger, watching his face intently.

“I’ll help you put them down,” he offered excitedly.

Whether it was because he anticipated a few hours alone, or the chance to be with his children again she couldn’t quite be sure. But it was safe to assume a combination of both.

Half an hour later she was returning from answering an emergency com from the Queen. Padmé stood just out of sight in the doorway to her bedroom. Studying her young husband. The intensity in his eyes still hadn’t faded back to their normal warm blue. The lingering effects of the confrontation with Palpatine she’d deduced. She didn’t need to push him to explain in order to understand him.

When he’d first set eyes on them she’d compared him to a large, powerful feline. Possessive and driven by instinct. And it didn’t seem to have faded. In front of her Anakin lay curled up in their bed. But he didn’t look the least bit relaxed, instead nuzzling and kissing the twins who were laid out beside him, not with teasing love but something that had the look of an even baser reaction. Something nature had bestowed on him.

Like a Nexu tending to its young by licking them.

Instead, her tall, broad-shouldered Jedi was using his hands, his nose, his lips to keep them close. And they responded. Looked for all the universe like a litter of cubs. Playing in the secure proximity of his body as he lifted them to his chest, cuddled them to his side. Communicating with him in a language so primal it didn’t require structured words or gestures from either of them.

The soft growling noises emanating from his belly topped off the scene. Almost as if he were warning potential predators off before they approached.

Padmé wasn’t threatened in the least.

In her own silence she approached from behind. Lay herself out on the bed too and spooned up against his back. For a moment Anakin almost seemed to purr as she pressed herself up to him. Slipped her hand around his waist. Splayed her lithe fingers over his belly and responded herself with a low growl, an autonomic rather than elective response. Her teeth came up and nipped at his ear. Practised fingers simultaneously thumbing the taut muscles of his abdomen even through his soft sleep shirt.

“Mine,” she quietly reminded him.

Her tone was so soft, so clipped, so *intense* that there was no way he could miss the stark reminder of ownership she inferred. His children, his body, his *soul* were hers. And she felt the need to remind him of that.

The approval that escaped from him wasn't the soft moans she was used to hearing. Instead his leg, driven by strong, powerful muscles, came over hers and trapped her to his body. The raw flesh of his hand grabbed at her fingers and drew them to his mouth. Clutching her soft skin into a firm kiss.

And there was a vibration of "yes," that throbbed so deeply against her chest it steadied both their hearts.

Looking over his shoulder, she tugged her hand away from his lips. Placed it back on his stomach and slipped underneath the fabric of his shirt, tracing the firm muscles that were so completely hers. Dark eyes locked on her offspring and watched them respond to their sire with instincts that could only have been bred into them.

For a long time the little family simply lay. Content to bask in the quiet aura of love that surrounded them. After almost an hour Padmé pressed a string of kisses down Anakin's shoulder and then withdrew from their shared embrace.

"I'll ask Threepio to start dinner," she explained without being questioned.

Her steps were light, her heart so truly free as she made her way out into the main living space.

She had a husband, and children, and a perfect little family all her own. Everything her heart could desire was hers. And it was content to stay hidden in their private space under her protection. While she fought the tyranny that engulfed their galaxy.

"Should I begin preparations for dinner Miss Padmé?" her protocol droid's voice came out of nowhere.

The Senator for Naboo looked up from her consuming thoughts.

"Yes, dinner. Thank you. Anakin is home tonight Threepio, he will be joining us as well."

He'd managed to get himself up, and dressed again. He'd even managed to move into the living room. It was slowly fading, the desperation to feel with his physical senses the unharmed bodies of his loved ones. But it still lingered, and Padmé staying out of the room for this long was frustrating.

The twins were just settling down to sleep, satiated and content from their warm dinner and the tender caresses of their parents. And just as the knight was waiting for his lady to emerge from their chamber, the door chimed.

Then opened.

He was a Jedi, he didn't freeze. But he did for a moment just pause as Sola and Darred walked in.

He hastened to his feet, wondering if he should bow. Should he acknowledge that he remembered the sister from their encounter years ago? And what about Darred? What was that strange look he was being given?

“Oh, hello,” Sola took the dilemma out of his hands.

His head bobbed nervously. *Stop acting like a teenaged Padawan!* He berated himself and was trying to think up something to say when he was rescued. By the rush of love that washed over him as he felt Padmé enter the room behind him.

“Sola, Darred. You’re home so soon,” she took it all in her stride.

Padmé, of course, sounded perfectly calm and innocent.

“The wind was getting up and Sola got hungry, so we thought we might come back and head out again later in the evening,” Darred explained.

Anakin kept a perfectly straight face, while his brother-in-law’s showed such abject apology. His features practically screamed ‘I’m sorry’ — as though he’d known that the Skywalker family needed more time alone.

Anakin’s eyes narrowed. *As if he knew about the Skywalker family at all. But he couldn’t possibly.*

The scandalous look her sister threw Padmé wasn’t nearly so discreet. And his beautiful love took it all in her stride.

“I invited Master Skywalker to join us for dinner,” she explained.

Darred was taking Sola’s cloak and hanging it in a storage compartment near the door.

“Sola, Darred, this is Anakin Skywalker. Anakin, my sister Sola and her husband Darred,” the queen of his heart introduced.

“The hero of the Republic. We’ve met before and I’m thrilled you’ll be joining us,” Sola was overly polite.

Anakin didn’t miss the deadly look Padmé threw her sister’s cheeky greeting. Before the situation could become too awkward though, Threepio interrupted.

“Supper is ready,” he informed Padmé before waddling away again.

Perfect Anakin acknowledged to himself. With a sense of propriety that only seemed to exert itself when he was forced into other company with Padmé, he bent his elbow and offered it to her with a quiet smirk of “m’lady.”

Four soft fingers came up and gently took the crook of his elbow. Allowing him to escort her into the dining room. He wanted to shudder as she used that barest bit of contact to arouse him. Stroking the pads of her fingertips over his sensitive inner joint. Running her thumb up and down the outer.

Blue eyes drifted from the site of her teasing him with such hidden, intimate caresses. He couldn’t help being enthralled by Padmé. She’d swept her hair up to be practical but it left her neck bare and as he walked, he couldn’t help but gaze. At the smooth, flawless expanse of creamy white skin. Tempting him to lean over and flick his tongue along the exposed length.

He swallowed, trying to get a hold of himself. Flickered his gaze up to make sure Padmé was watching Sola. Then Anakin bent his head down. Began murmuring so softly only she would be able to hear.

“If we were alone I would be pressing soft kisses along,” his free hand reached up and brushed across the bared skin along her shoulder. “Here.”

He could feel Padmé shiver under his touch. His own tongue inadvertently slipping out to wet his dry lips. Wondering how long he could hold himself back. *How much I want to kiss you.* Just before they entered the dining room he whispered softly into her ear “my love.”

Because he couldn’t keep it in. Because she had to hear again just what she was to him. Then he took heed of the small warning her fingers squeezed into his arm and stopped. Resigning himself to that detested position of friend.

Still, as he pull Padmé’s chair back and allowed her to take her seat, he caught it. That delicious little smile. The one that was only for him. The one that appeared when he’d made her so happy it couldn’t keep itself off her face, even in public.

In this pretence — dinner with Anakin, Sola and Darred — she was sister foremost. Then friend. Not really Senator. And to two of them she definitely wasn’t — well there wasn’t a word to encompass it all, but whatever it was she wasn’t supposed to be *that* to Anakin.

But he hadn’t gotten the memorandum. Because those delicious eyes were smouldering. All through dinner. They locked on her and almost refused to let go from the moment she was seated. Every time her gaze touched him she felt like melting. There were flecks of an unnatural blue still running through his irises.

They told her in no uncertain terms that if Sola and Darred evaporated into thin air at that moment, she’d find the meal laid out in front of them gone. And she was pretty sure he had wicked plans that involved finding herself stretched out on the table to replace it.

Laughing at Sola’s account of the excited crowds lining all the walkways beneath them, she reached for her drink. Taking a sip she let the liquid slip down her throat. Her eyes drifted in innocent response as she heard Anakin’s laughter warm her. Only to be greeted with him. Biting his lip in that way he had. Right now it didn’t hold the Padawan’s shy innocence it had when she’d first seen it. The embarrassment about the thoughts he was having. Right now, it looked like he was restraining himself from devouring her.

Suddenly her clothes were too tight. Her breath caught in her throat. And the liquid she’d just tasted lingered unwontedly in her mouth.

Annnakin a more seductive voice within herself purred. Watching him as his shoulders shifted, a sure sign of his unconscious tensing. The twins were asleep and they wouldn’t stay that way for long. Though she relished this chance to spend time with her sister, to introduce her family to her beloved even if it was under the guise of friendship, she wanted him. Now. They’d been apart, his life had been threatened. For the first time in more than four months.

She wanted him in her bed, being her husband, before she could take another breath.

And those hungry darkening eyes weren’t helping.

While Sola wasn't looking he silently snapped his teeth at her. His strong fingers caressing the stem of his glass with covert promises of passion.

"Well this has been a lovely evening," she announced, jumping to her feet.

It took less than five minutes for her to be ushering Anakin out the door, and making her own excuses for bed.

By the time her sibling let her go he was already bounding back in through their private entrance with the energy of a denied predator.

Later that night, Anakin awoke to the blissful silence of their bedroom. He took the time for a single deep breath to pull him fully into consciousness. Briefly contracting all the muscles in his flesh arm. Where Padmé was for once tucked up into his side. Peacefully asleep and cuddling, just how he loved it. His eyes immediately sought her out, letting the light spilling in from nearby buildings and passing speeders illuminate her glowing skin. Long fingers couldn't stop themselves from ghosting over her bare arm, the one thrown so possessively over his chest. Up into the river of hair that fell down her back and over his arm.

You're all mine he quietly mused, wondrously running his fingers through the soft curls.

Her name came out of his lips in a contented sigh as he turned his eyes to the ceiling. Wondering what could possibly have brought him from the exhausted sleep her loving had put him into.

A second later he felt Leia awaken. Knowing it would only be a moment before she cried out Anakin carefully untangled himself from his beautiful companion. Tucking his pillow into her arms to take his place while he tended to their daughter.

Then he silently rose and reached into the rippling questions of the force, trying to settle Leia's nerves. Dark eyes he loved so much in another looked up at him from the small bassinet. Curious and excited when they saw who was peering down at them. Anakin plucked his beloved offspring from her sleeping blankets and folded her into his embrace. Leaving the silent son and his beloved to their rest, he and Leia made their way out into the kitchen.

Anakin didn't need any noises from her to know what was wrong. She was hungry. The young father found the sweet milk container and heated it, even as he gazed down at his youngling in amazement. There was a need she was radiating — not just for food but also for the emotional fulfilment of bonding with Padmé. The warmth of her mother's love that so often accompanied her meals. And Anakin could feel it. Identified the emotion immediately, so close to something he often experienced. That need for the passionate senator's love and attention.

"Good?" he asked quietly, the depth of sleep he'd been pulled from clear in his voice.

Leia took the tip of the container he offered in her mouth and just drunk hungrily. Didn't really seem to respond. In fact looked like she was waiting for something, expectant.

Anakin snagged a datapad from the bench and made his way back into the living room. Settling down on the divan he laid Leia out beside him, his hand still propping up her milk.

Although they had yet to reach the end of their second month of life, there were very distinct differences between their twins. Subtle things Anakin had noticed already. Like the fact that Luke loved to be held. As long as he was in the arms of one of his love-struck parents, he was happy. Leia, on the other hand, loved to be talked to. To hear his voice, whether it was about great battle he'd been in, or the warm banter he shared with Padmé. Talking alone made her light up.

So even as he one-handedly began typing up a report on his battle, something he knew would be expected by the council and soon, he talked. He told her what he was writing, about the battle with Palpatine. Something so highly classified its full details would never reach the ears of any other civilian.

Except for this Jedi youngling who listened with rapt attention, her eyes glittering with excited flecks of gold every time he glanced down at her.

Within ten minutes she'd polished off the entire drink. Anakin heard the change in sound and for a moment paused in his story telling. Carefully removing the now empty container and setting it beside them.

Though he didn't usually natter on excessively, he was beginning to learn that they liked it. It soothed them. Even to just hear a running commentary on what was going on.

"You're finished, hmm?"

She seemed to stop smiling for a moment as he quietly murmured to her. Anakin discarded his datapad and reached for their baby. *Ours*. His still wondrous reminder to himself tickled the edges of his lips with a smile. It accompanied the tender stroking motion he made against Leia's back as he rested her against his chest, her tiny chin finding a place to nuzzle at his shoulder.

"My beautiful Leia," he mumbled.

Falling back to slump against the couch, his exhaustion began to catch up with him.

"Are you happy now princess?"

He closed his eyes briefly, feeling the tiredness of the most intense battle in Jedi history begin to catch up with him. *Sleep. Definitely need to...sleep.* Leia waited the barest of moments. Then opened her lungs and cried out.

Anakin's drooping eyelids sprung back open in surprise.

"Leia?" he asked quietly.

As if the child could respond. No such luck. He probed her gently, wondering what could possibly be wrong. Unfortunately the force chose not to be his ally — she seemed perfectly fine.

"Shhhh," he soothed.

Getting to his feet he began to pace the living room floor. Back and forth. Back and forth.

"Princess Leia it's alright. It's alright. I'm here."

Long fingers carefully traced up and down her back, but it seemed to do no good. She continued to cry long after her young father had run out of things to try. Her soft body simply rested against his chest and bellowed.

Almost ten minutes had passed and Anakin was no closer to calming her down.

He headed out toward the lights of the city, wondering if he should take her out onto the balcony and try a change of scenery. Then again it was cold out tonight. He didn't need to make her sick. So as he reached the glass he turned to pace back across the long room with his bouncing steps.

To find himself being watched.

By Darred.

Anakin froze. In absolute panic, he froze. He was standing in his apartment, the one he wasn't supposed to live in, with the wife he wasn't supposed to be in love with. Carrying the baby he wasn't supposed to have fathered. In his sleep pants and a loose shirt looking dishevelled.

Uh-oh.

The calm Jedi who had the peace and strength to take his love for everything pure and bright in his life and defeat the epitome of evil disappeared. A bumbling idiot was left in his place.

"D-Darred," was all he managed to get out.

There had to be a reason. He had to be able to make some reason up for being in the apartment in the middle of the night. With Leia. While Padmé was asleep. *Think! Padmé would be able to handle this!* An old faithful that had served them many times stumbled out of his lips before he could stop it

"Padmé is in trouble."

The low calm of his voice obviously didn't convince Darred.

It was almost amusing to see the great hero of the Republic fumble for a legitimate excuse when caught. It was obvious it wasn't his forte.

Darred wanted to burst out laughing. The man had been caught red handed. Soothing the baby and pacing like a father and everything. And 'Padmé's in trouble' was the best he could come up with?

This is the man who defeated the Sith Lord?

Before he could stop himself he was teasing the flustered young man.

"Padmé's in trouble so you decide to nurse her child looking like you just fell out of bed?"

The Jedi's jaw almost dropped. Darred let his head do some quick calculations as the blonde tried to compose himself. If he had suspicions the other night then this definitely confirmed it. This guy had fathered the twins. The state of his clothes right now practically

screamed that he'd been in bed just before he came out here. With Leia. Which meant he'd been asleep in Padmé's room. It wasn't a huge stretch to conclude in Padmé's bed. And he'd probably spent the last couple of months there too.

Protecting her my ass! He suddenly realised, rolling his eyes to himself. *Of course! She wasn't in danger all that time! She was hiding with her lover!* Darred suddenly froze. Looked the gaping Jedi up and down. This guy wasn't in it for the short term, not if after the biggest triumph of his life, of their times, he was spending the night pacing the floor with a newborn.

This guy's in it for the long haul. This isn't a one night stand and it never was...Padmé was lying.

He reassessed the man who had been rather entertaining at dinner. This time with slightly different eyes. And it only took him a moment to realise that Padmé wouldn't be in this for a physical pleasure, or even companionship. Which meant this was probably the only brother-in-law he'd ever know.

And it probably wasn't the best idea to put one known to be such a proud warrior offside.

On a split second decision he walked across the room and held out his arms. To take Leia. Anakin shied away for a moment, cupping the tiny head to his shoulder. Almost like he was afraid.

"Let me try," Darred offered.

Anakin reluctantly loosened his grip. The way the baby transferred from one set of male arms to another said much more than the Jedi had. This guy had held babies. He knew how to support the head. And keep the blankets wrapped. And he couldn't tear his eyes away from the red-rimmed ones that left his embrace.

Then Darred began to count in his head.

One.

Two.

The littlest Skywalker's lungs didn't shut down for even a second.

Three.

"I don't think —"

Four.

"— it's working."

Five.

"Wait a minute," Darred calmed Anakin.

Six.

Leia was squalling by now — making what had been happening before seem like whimpers. And the Jedi was unhappy. It was obvious that seeing his child in distress was unnerving the younger man. The human fingers were retracting and flexing at his side in what looked like a barely restrained itch to take the baby back.

Seven.

She was wriggling now too. Trying desperately to break free of her uncle's hold though she didn't have enough power to even support her own baby head.

Eight.

"Maybe," Anakin began again.

It was obvious the father was having a hard time watching this. He wanted her back. Even if it made no difference he wanted her back in his arms. Darred remembered that feeling as barely a whisper, it had been a long time since his girls were so small and helpless.

Nine.

"Just wait," Darred persuaded.

Ten.

"Ok, here you go Leia."

Darred was so careful as he put her back into her father's arms. And the crying stopped. Just like that she pressed her little face into the patch of bare skin near his neck as her whimpering ceased.

The look on the Hero's face said it all. It was probably the only time he'd get a look of such a surprise on his behalf from a Jedi, so he took the time to truly savour it.

The younger man's long fingers seemed to slowly settle on the back of the dark little head. Barely coming to rest on the delicate skin. His eyes shutting for the barest of moments as he breathed in the scent of her baby-soft curls. Before placing the most tender kiss to her infant ear.

"How did you do that?" Anakin wanted to know, tearing his gaze away to look up in awe.

"Just had to remind her how much she wanted *you*," Darred grinned.

Then made his way into the kitchen like it was nothing. Secretly grinning proudly to himself. Hearing Skywalker follow him and pulling down a second cup to make them both a hot drink.

"I don't understand," Anakin pressed.

He looked back and studied the tall, muscular guy as he leaned against a wall. His hands and eyes and attention all locked on fussing with the little bundle in his arms.

As a gentle way of explaining Darred changed the subject slightly.

"It took me a few nights to work it out. When I'd sit up with them — it became clear after awhile that they, particularly Luke, would quiet down when the HoloNet was on. Not anything exciting, just the news feeds. And even then, only some of the time."

The water was starting to make a boiling noise. Turning, he began fiddling with two cups as he continued his story.

"Once, he stopped crying just as you came on. That's when it clicked."

He turned his head and looked Padmé's lover directly into that blue that had been the giveaway.

"He has your eyes you know."

It didn't take much studying to see the proud smile that spread across his face.

"I know," the deep voice rumbled.

It reassured Darred like nothing else could. And it also went a bit of a way towards explaining why Padmé had been acting the way she had. This wasn't just her sex partner, this was her *life* partner. Her parenting partner. The love shining out of that man's eyes couldn't be disguised.

Clearing his throat Darred turned back to the ingredients.

"They know who you are," he quietly acknowledged.

"So do you," Anakin pointed out thoughtfully.

Although without a hint of the suspicion Darred might have suspected. Maybe the quiet signals he'd been trying to send him, the ones that said he understood, had been getting through. And maybe now was the time to get some information. Now — when a bond of friendship seemed to be striking up.

"Not exactly. What are you — friend, lover...?"

he prompted, trying to see if he could get all the information.

"Husband," Anakin quietly corrected.

Now it was Darred's turn to be flabbergasted. *Husband? He's barely an adult!...Padmé is married*

Anakin liked the way that word felt coming off his tongue. Husband. He was Padmé's husband. It was something he didn't get to say very often. And he wasn't sure, but this could be the first time he'd ever said it to anybody else.

It felt good.

To admit the quality he liked most about himself and not have to be ashamed of it.

"*That* I didn't guess," Darred finally seemed to compose himself.

Anakin tried act nonchalant, shrugging. But it didn't stop the bubbles of happiness that welled inside him. Drifting up from his stomach and tingling along his chest.

"Have you told your wife?"

He waited in a tense moment of silence for the answer. For Padmé's sake, he hoped it was 'No'. She didn't want anybody to know about them. And that was her decision. Which he supported. Especially when it came to her family. She wouldn't like having that choice taken out of her hands.

And he didn't like to think what the consequences would be when she found out it was because he'd been caught half-dressed in their living room in the middle of the night.

"I haven't told Sola. Would you rather I didn't?"

The young husband couldn't stop the sigh of relief.

"When Padmé wants her to know, she'll tell her. But I don't want to get in the way of their relationship. And she should do it when the time is right."

"You don't think that's now?" Darred immediately challenged him.

Anakin didn't even have to think about that one. He slowly shook his head. Remembering how frustrated, insignificant, *wrong* his Padmé had been feeling because of Sola's put downs. Now was not the time to be revealing such things. Spite and rage would mingle with the revelation, and would probably always linger. He didn't want that for Padmé. Not with her only sibling.

"Then you may be assured of my silence."

"Thank you," Anakin appreciated.

Something subtly shifted in his consciousness and he automatically glanced down. To the tiny form still cradled so beautifully against him.

Carefully he stroked her with wisps of the force. Finding it was unnecessary to clam his offspring. She'd already started to drift off. Anakin just grinned in quiet understanding and reached with his thumb to shut down the datapad he was still holding from before.

"I think we'll head back to bed," he whispered.

Darred nodded and bid him a quiet "good night," as if this was the most normal situation in the universe.

Anakin paused, almost about to demand the man's silence. To take the time to make threats. To ensure he wouldn't breathe a word to Sola. Instead he gave the guy one last look and decided that he'd trust him. After all, he'd been doing the nights with his precious children for the past few days. That already gave him much more credit than almost anyone else.

With a silent nod he pushed himself off the wall and left the kitchen. Left the other man for the evening and wrapped himself up in his perfect sleeping daughter again. Wandered back to their bedroom absorbed by her miniscule form.

Where Padmé lay tucked up exactly as he'd left her. Looking so deliciously cuddlable he wanted to get back into bed with her right now. His feet travelled the floor quickly to Leia's bassinet. Laying her down with hands infinitely more practised than they had been two months ago.

One of her tiny socks slipped off just as he reached for the blanket. And in that moment he got lost. In the tiny wrinkled pink foot that emerged from its casing. So sweet and perfect, smaller than even the palm of his hand. He reached out, reverently cupping the infant foot. Brushing the pad of his thumb over the minute curled up toes.

You're absolutely perfect Princess Leia he wanted to tell her but the words wouldn't come out. His throat choked as he looked down in wonder at their little one. Instead he settled for leaning down and kissing her plump cheek. A barely audible murmuring of

"good night" filled her ear.

Then he slipped the sock back on and soundlessly tucked her in. He spared her a final glance, almost more than his willpower could stand. Then he bolted for home. Into bed, under the covers, and nuzzling into Padmé's side. Where the soft, warm form of the woman he loved made a small noise of contentment and tucked herself into his arms.

Chapter 17

Author's Note: Apologies for the delay. I've finally given up trying to perfect the following chapter as I wish it could be.

Author's Note 2: This is almost the end of the story with only the epilogue to follow.

Chapter Seventeen

Anakin came from his deep sleep to a more conscious level of awareness without understanding why. But it was almost automatic that he half-fell off the bed. He was across the bedroom before he realised he was still in Padmé's apartment. And he had felt Luke waking up.

He opened his eyes to slits.

Light pierced them. Not the artificial light of glowlamps, but the light of Coruscant's day breaking.

"Damn," he whispered to himself.

He was at the baby's bedside murmuring "it's alright sweetheart, I'm here," in no time.

He'd spent the night. That had definitely not been the plan. As he reached for his son he started running a few quick calculations in his head. He probably just had time enough to feed Luke and make a frenzied rush for the temple. Obi-Wan was probably in Bacta down in the healer's centre. The masters were hopefully deeply involved with post-battle clean-up. With any luck, no one would think his disappearance too suspicious. At most he could explain it away as a night of drunken partying. Then he could just slip quietly in. They'd like that excuse more than the truth that he'd been quietly eyeing Padmé over dinner until they went to bed and made love for half the night.

He smirked at that. Yes, if someone asked, drunken irresponsible exploits he couldn't quite remember, were the perfect alibi. For sure.

His false lack of responsibility couldn't be further from the truth. He quietly tugged on the leather of his right glove, and let thoughts of Jedi slip away.

"Hello Luke," he whispered, lifting the soft lump of his infantile son up carefully.

Luke hadn't even had a chance to cry out. Anakin was that attuned to the twins.

"Mmmm, you're getting so big. Why did you grow so fast when I wasn't here?"

He nuzzled his nose against his son's while his feet carried him into the kitchen. Deciding it was unlikely he'd run into his in-laws again, this time he reached out to make *sure* they were asleep in their bed.

"You're so perfect. With your little fingers and your little toes," Anakin admired.

He trailed his own fingertips over the tiny appendages. Luke watched wide-eyed and fascinated. The tiny fingers grasping at the warm container he was offered to feed from.

“Does that taste good?”

Anakin continued to carry on a quiet monologue. He had nothing important to say, but he wanted his only son to hear his voice. For Luke to understand that he wasn’t alone in a house full of girls. That even though it was Padmé he saw day in, day out, there was someone else out there who loved the little prince very much.

In that moment he understood. Just how infinitely precious his children were to him. That he would do anything in his power to make them happy. And that his own fulfilment was now irreversibly linked to theirs.

More importantly, as he looked down at Luke, he finally understood what he had to do about Obi-Wan. And it wasn’t confess his transgressions. It wasn’t force his own father-figure to acknowledge the relationship they truly had. The one Obi-Wan as a Jedi wasn’t allowed to have. Just as Anakin wasn’t supposed to have such a connection with his own offspring.

There was no way he could allow Obi-Wan to choose between his way of life and his relationship with Anakin.

It seemed too soon when the liquid was all gone. And the day was well and truly beginning.

With a grin to the blue eyes that Anakin knew matched his own perfectly, they returned to Padmé. She was still asleep but Anakin slid Luke in next to her under the blanket, only his tiny head peaking out. What followed was a mad dash around the bedroom. Discarding sleep pants for decent day ones. Pulling on his shirt. Tunics. Boots. Cloak.

Then his hand found Luke’s head, and his lips found Padmé’s ear.

“I have to go. Luke’s tucked in next to you so don’t hurt him. You look beautiful.”

He kissed his way along her cheek. Then suckled at her mouth until she started to respond.

“Have to go,” he groaned.

But her hands caught in his hair suddenly. Twisted and yanked him close.

“What did I do to deserve you?” she rasped as her lips sipped from his.

Like he was a decadent sweet.

Anakin didn’t say the first words that came into his head. The truth that always occurred to him when she even hinted at needing a reason for his love for her. He was hers. Plain and simple. There wasn’t even an idea that there would ever have been anyone else for him. She had taken his heart before it could develop fully. And it had always been hers. Meaning that as he grew into an adult his lust had concentrated on one single object.

Padmé. Who lay beneath him whispering that she missed him. That she hoped he’d be home later.

“I’m only going to check on Obi-Wan. I have to know he’s alright. If you are lucky I’ll be back home before breakfast. If not, have a wonderful day.”

“After the start it’s had, I probably will. Come back soon Anakin,” she grinned.

“Bariss.”

Anakin nodded politely to his friend as he entered the low-lit med-ward room.

“How is he?”

His voice was soft as it inquired of the peacefully floating Master. Showing only the concern of a close friend. Yet he felt a sudden tightening in his chest. A fervent wish that his own son never had to see him like this.

“He should be in the tank for a few more days and then we will wake him.”

Anakin looked down in surprise as delicate fingers lightly squeezed his forearm.

“Don’t worry Anakin. He will make a full recovery.”

Before he could stop himself he’d already enacted that familiar head bob. The one that couldn’t quite disguise his lack of belief. Luckily it was enough for Bariss to understand that he really didn’t wish to talk. And with that he was left alone.

To silently contemplate the only father he would ever know. And how as Obi-Wan’s only apprentice, he had so bitterly disappointed him. For a moment he almost wished he was sorry.

He had destroyed the Sith Lord, but in the eyes of the Jedi he was a complete and utter failure. A Jedi with no territorial allegiances did not value a small patch of Naboo above the rest of the galaxy. Did not give his political alliance to a single senator no matter what her position. Nor did her children claim his heart before rationality.

Although he didn’t feel like one, he knew he would be seen as a failure.

And he wouldn’t allow Obi-Wan to suffer that disgrace. Not when only now was his fledgling relationship with the twins beginning to understand how much of Obi-Wan’s own feeling of success must be wrapped up in his own.

Obi-Wan had already lost his master. He would not allow him to be disgraced by his son.

Firmly resolved he pressed his palm against the clear tank. Looked up at his master with a small smile tracing around his lips. Then returned to his home. Where Luke had made it back into his cradle, and Padmé sleepily welcomed him back into her bed.

A few hours later Anakin awoke slowly, feeling almost perfect — as if every piece of the jigsaw puzzle had been pushed into place and only a single one remained.

Tentatively he let his hand wander out across his side. Trying to seem as if he wasn’t searching, just in case in his sleep-befuddled state he was actually in the temple, or still out on Geonosis. His fingers encountered fine curls of hair and soon warm, bare skin. Assuring him he was exactly where he wanted to be.

Eagerly he rolled to his side and threw an arm over her. Pressing himself up to her sleeping back. With a big grin he nuzzled his nose at her neck. A deep breath inhaled the subtle scent of her perfume and sweat. It made him absolutely sure there was no place he'd rather be. Not fighting Sidious, not sparring with Obi-Wan — Obi-Wan!

He cursed silently to himself, thinking about all the subtle hints his friend kept dropping. The man may be recovering from injuries — and from his early morning visit he knew his mentor was still in bacta. But he would be just as nosy once he recovered.

Anakin did want people to know Leia and Luke were his children. He was proud of the tiny little things, and he would be their father whether it was allowed or not. But right now, Obi-Wan would not be able to handle that truth. And Anakin would not force it on him. He wouldn't hurt his friend, his mentor, his own father, by forcing him to make the decision between friendship and duty.

They should remove the suspicion. So Obi-Wan could relax and be happy. They should do it now, get it over with.

"Padmé," he murmured.

Rubbing her shoulder to wake her. Rolling her onto her back and for a moment just staring down at her lovingly. Her soft curls were in disarray after they'd fallen into each other's arms earlier. Shoulders pale and bared where the blanket slipped off. His heart began beating faster as he forgot his thoughts entirely. Overcome by the need to just study her. Unable to help himself he leaned down, kissing her tenderly. Drowning in her awakening lips. She moaned quietly beneath him. Her hand slipping up into his hair. Tentatively he pulled back just a little, kissing a soft trail to her ear.

"Wake up," he coaxed in a whisper.

Her head turned instinctively towards his voice. Familiar hands tugging him back to her.

"You can't have anything left," she murmured.

He laughed at the half-unconscious assertion and succumbed to her caress. Resting his chin on her chest and staring at her wordlessly.

"The twins will be awake soon, go back to sleep," Padmé broke him from his study.

She also reminded him of why he'd been trying to wake her in the first place. He felt like being her husband was the most gratifying role in the galaxy as he grabbed the edges of the blankets and tucked up into her. Glancing around the room conspiratorially and then placing his lips on her ear. Almost as if it was a game, he started murmuring in a low, husky, seductive voice, unable to help the feelings she stirred up inside him.

"Before we left to finish the war, Obi-Wan wanted me to remind you, Senator, that your son hasn't had a baby-health check.

Padmé turned over in his arms, warm eyes dragging themselves open to meet his.

"I thought you said they didn't need one?" she murmured.

"They don't, they're fine. But they need to have a midichlorian test, in case they should be identified as having Jedi potential," he reminded in his hushed tone.

Her body froze against him as she seemed to not only take in what he was saying, but take in what Obi-Wan's request for the test implied. Her eyes widened considerably, fingers clasping her husband's face as she fretted

"He knows?"

"Shh, don't worry. He doesn't *know* it's me," he reassured.

His eyes searched her face for further trauma. Stroking the soft hair back from her forehead.

"We should get them both tested now, so I can come and," he broke off, his lips smiling up into a smirk as he murmured "interfere. Unfortunately the equipment may start malfunctioning."

Padmé didn't seem to share his mirth and his smile fell away. He rolled her beneath him, needing to know she was alright. Needing to fix any problem before it even started for her. Anxious hands found her naked arms and started smoothing down them with worried impatience.

"What is it?" he asked quietly.

"You don't want them to be Jedi," she noted quietly.

The stunned look on Anakin's face revealed that no, he hadn't thought this through at all. But if Obi-Wan was getting inquisitive about it, then the topic they'd hoped to put off until the twins were a bit older would have to be faced now.

Suddenly a spear of pain went straight through her chest. The thought of taking both the tiny little things that slept so peacefully under the window, Luke and Leia whom she nurtured and loved, the evidence of a natural progression in her marriage to Anakin, to take them to the Jedi temple and never have them by her side again was shattering. Only his solid weight, calm and reassuring in its love as he hovered above her kept her from falling apart.

"I —"

He paused and her features twisted, caught between relief and agony. She couldn't give them up. No more than she could give *him* up.

"I think," he slowly pondered.

He pressed a reassuring kiss to the tip of her nose before he went on. As he tried desperately to soothe her Padmé knew he would respect her wishes. Whatever he wanted for the twins future, it would be a joint decision. And if they were to be Jedi — why couldn't they be the grown-up Jedi her loving husband was, without having to give up the priceless baby she'd gone through such a painful birth for?

The thoughts of him clasping her hand back then, were pulled up as he took her hand now.

"They are very powerful Padmé. But there are many ways they could be Jedi without — without us having to give them up."

He stumbled a little on his words and she felt a certain wave of relief that he too found this difficult. She didn't know if she shared his optimism though.

"What ways?" she demanded.

He propped himself up on his elbows so he could drink from her lips as he spoke. His delectable mouth hovered above her, tantalising her, calling out to be kissed so much that she could no longer hold herself back.

"Well, when they get a little older we could ask them."

Padmé smiled sadly.

"What if they have so much hero-worship for their dashing father they choose blindly to follow him?"

He smirked, capturing her soft lips in his.

"Alright, that one's out," he murmured a moment later. "How about, when they reach the age I was, I will get them to sit down, and truly think it out. And if they really really want to be, then I will train them."

She eyed him speculatively.

"But surely the Order would expel you when they find out, that they're yours."

She said the last few words so quietly he almost didn't hear them. But it set off explosive fireworks of dazzling proportions throughout his energised body.

"Yes they're mine," he growled hungrily.

Padmé squealed at him. Overcome by hunger he flipped so that he was on his back and her tantalising half-naked form covered him.

"Would you like me to remind you how we got pregnant with them?" he asked.

Her hips shifted, indicating not long, not long.

"Anakin," she half-admonished, her tone tinted with amusement.

"Or perhaps it was like this," he continued, rolling her back beneath him and gently cradling her head.

Bringing one of her legs up to rest along his side. Suddenly the playfulness was gone as she stared up at him trustingly. Her eyes shining with devoted love. Her body moving to accept him close against her.

"I don't really remember. I am willing to keep our options open and jog your memory," he whispered huskily and she shook her head with a soft smile.

"So you don't want to give them up?" she sounded like she wanted him to be sure.

"It's for their own good," he told her quietly. "Otherwise they might turn out like Obi-Wan."

She raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

“No no,” he hurried to correct. “I mean, I want them to know they can fall in love and be with someone — like we are.”

Her eyes shined up at him with unshed tears. She loved him so much. His simple assessment for the twins’ lives was that they couldn’t be happy without finding a loving partner, as their parents had done. Her chest tightened with his continued devotion.

“Then lets go get them tested,” she whispered hoarsely.

Padmé’s hand slid over Anakin’s forearm. Their lips hungrily tasting one another. Two hours later and they’d barely managed to dress themselves.

“I thought we were going to get them tested.”

The young husband managed to get that single sentence out. But his train of thought was gone as soon that line had been delivered. Because even being near her was finally finding his soul.

The front door was just behind her back, and they had been going out. He shivered quietly as familiar fingers stroked his arm. Feeling tremors on his skin that only ever occurred when his wife touched him.

The movement of his daughter in his arm barely registered. He pulled her a little closer to his chest, just to be safe. So he wouldn’t drop her. But the youngest Skywalker was not at the forefront of his mind just now. When Padmé was demonstrating that she loved him he couldn’t see beyond it.

And right now he hungrily slid his hand around her waist into the small of her back. Pulling her closer into him. Not crushing their babies that nestled in their arms, but feeling her touching him just the same. Large fingers absently played with the fabric of her long top. Unknowingly they drifted up between the open join of her clothes, sliding beneath. The touch of her long cloak registered against his shoulder as he skimmed her back.

The soft warmth of nude skin greeted his unknowing, wandering hand. They both drew audible breath and then Padmé’s musical laughter brushed his consciousness.

A grin couldn’t be repressed on his own lips. Pressing the warmth of Padmé into his hard body, he held her firm for a moment. She pressed a handful of jovial, hard kisses to his lips then pulled back.

“We didn’t even make it out the door,” she quipped.

The smile that quirked her face lit her all the way to her eyes. It made his heart burn with an unceasing love to see her soul bared for his consumption. And her soft body was just as unable to withstand his touch, as he was a slave to hers.

“I can’t resist you,” he reminded.

The intense sincerity glistening in his eyes begged her to believe him.

“I can’t resist you,” she echoed.

Those roaming fingers came up to brush over his cheek. Briefly allowing him to press into them, before young twins decided they’d finally had enough of being ignored and by joint agreement opened their strong lungs.

“Ohhhh,” Padmé indulged them.

He kept his vision full of dark twirled hair until her face was hidden, occupied with Luke. Then he too ducked down to look at baby heads tucked into layers of blankets. Different dark curls shook this time until he gave her a smile all her own, and stroked his fingers over the bridge of her young nose.

Then soft lips touched his ear before he even had the chance to properly regain his equilibrium.

“Now, why don’t we do this before you distract me anymore, my handsome Knight.”

“Padmé,” he groaned in what could barely pass muster as a complaint.

She kissed his cheek one final time and then turned to leave with his only son wrapped in her arms. The small family happily made its way to a transport waiting for them in the shuttle bay, Leia squealing in happiness as Anakin paid her at least half his attention.

“Alright daddy’s Princess,” he teased.

Leia freed one of her tiny fists and reached out for him excitedly. Her power was like a buoyant balloon of happiness in the force, and the grin on his face refused to be suppressed now.

“Yes they’re very beautiful,” he told her with a good deal of laughter refusing to be suppressed.

She clenched and flexed her fingers in his direction.

“Baby girl,” he jokingly chastised her.

He captured the little hand that was reaching for him and gave it a few noisy kisses.

“You’ll get cold,” he warned.

He raised his eyebrows at her then tucked the free fingers back into her soft blanket. His eyes briefly flickered up from his fatherly doting to where Padmé walked a few footsteps ahead of him. To see her doing something pretty similar with their little prince.

His heart flushed with love that made his vision flash back to a young bride accepting his hand.

“You bewitch me.”

Padmé didn’t acknowledge his compliment. Not when they walked up the boarding ramp nor when the security pilots guided the craft into the traffic lanes. But as Anakin settled against one of the bulkheads, the Senator from Naboo came to rest against his chest in a peaceful contentment.

And his smile widened even further. A dark glove slipping around her shoulders.

Padmé and Anakin restricted their interaction to droids only. It would be easier if their profile in the med centre was kept as low as possible. That was much easier to achieve when living beings weren't involved. And the only record of their being there was the final outcome it produced.

In no time at all they were in a small consulting room. A droid extending a needle to take a small blood sample from each of the twins. Anakin winced as first Leia and then Luke were pricked with the long tip. Their sharp cries cut right through him, and the pain he could feel was difficult to bear. They broadcast it into the force, and he was already listening for it.

They were little things who lived the most basic of existences. Sleeping, waking, eating, and playing made up their days. And nowhere in that routine did physical pain play a big role.

Making the shock of the jab even more intense. Anakin immediately felt guilty, blaming himself for forcing this upon them. Just to satisfy his own selfish will. Just for Obi-Wan's happiness.

Luckily there was something there to soothe all three of them. Before Anakin could wallow too deep in self-pity

"Shhhh, oh honey," Padmé hushed Luke.

She stroked his little fingers and then held the soft gauze to his joint as the droid indicated. Stemming any bleeding from the infant's vein. It was all Anakin needed to take a deep breath and relax. Find his more peaceful self and look down to his unhappy daughter.

In this he took Padmé's lead. Make soft noises of reassurance as he tried to make her more comfortable.

They both looked up as the machine that had been analysing their samples beeped. Its results calculated.

His gaze flickered to Padmé and for a moment they shared an understanding. This was it. The moment of facing the truth they both already knew. And truly beginning to conceal it from every other being that breathed.

Anakin shifted Leia so that his right arm was free. He was going to need it.

The droid floated across the room with the results to a small terminal. Ready to enter them into the Republic's birth records database and complete baby health checks for half their family.

"Leia Skywalker, younger of twins, health: perfect," the droid relayed in its mechanical voice.

Typing simultaneously as it inserted the data into her file.

"Midichlorian count: one-nine-eight-seven."

Anakin waved his hand after the MD's fingers had entered the first three digits. The fourth was never entered; the metal finding the bench top instead without actually realising it had been improperly entered.

He grinned at Padmé, breathing easier. One twin down as having no Jedi potential whatsoever. With a count so low there could not be speculation it was his, even if he admitted to sharing Padmé's bed. Obi-Wan's mental security assured. Now only one twin to go.

"Two."

Anakin startled and clumsily reached into the force. The droid's hand slipped off the key just before it was depressed, and Leia's three digit outcome remained. He craned to see the screen, his face horrified that it might all come to naught if that last unexpected number had been entered.

Padmé could see better and gave him a brief smile, closing her eyes and nodding thankfully. It was alright then. He'd done it.

He looked down to the dark eyes peering at him from the comfort of his arms.

"Nineteen thousand?" he whispered in disbelief.

"Luke Skywalker, elder of twins, health: perfect," it continued.

A smile was twitching at the corner of his lips.

"Nineteen *thousand*," he quietly repeated to himself.

"Midichlorian count: one-nine-eight-seven-two," the droid finished.

This time Anakin's fingers did not hesitate, and his fingers flicked by his side with surety. Luke's number too was recorded for all time as being less than two hundred.

My twins he beamed. At the same time acknowledging that it was good they'd decided to test the twins like this. Because more than any genetic test, their numbers proved that Luke and Leia could not have been fathered by anyone else in the known galaxy.

Padmé was looking rather smug herself as she noted to Anakin

"Twins in all ways then."

He was still in a kind of awe and just gave her a quiet nod.

"Thank you for your assistance," she addressed the droid.

She stroked his arm as a simple hint to leave. But Anakin's arm lit up with life, the tingle of her caress running up and down it as if he'd never been touched there before. The muscles contracted and he felt his heart give a start in his chest. Knowing he'd have to wait until they were not in a public med centre to get even half way to reciprocating how much she made him feel alive.

Leia got both his hands and a tighter cuddle as Padmé's husband yanked up his hood, turned and followed her from the consultation room. The Jedi just managed to keep his mouth clamped shut until they were safely aboard their secure transport again. But then he couldn't hold back any longer.

"Nineteen *thousand* Padmé! I knew they were powerful but nineteen thousand is unheard of! Even for Jedi!"

He was gushing as he kept looking from Leia, to Padmé, and back again.

"I thought yours was higher than that," she pointed out smugly.

Obviously intensely proud of the virile young man she had almost bouncing by her side. That had created such powerful offspring with her.

"It is," he conceded.

"Well then why are you surprised?"

Silence descended for a moment then he looked at her intensely.

"If anyone else ever saw those results they'd know Padmé. There is literally no one else, human or otherwise, who could have —"

he gestured to Luke as if that were enough explanation.

The silent *who could have fathered them* reverberating around and around in his head. Caught in the fathering bit. In images of being with Padmé. Tangled up in the dreams of spending the rest of his life raising a family with her. He thought of that for a moment, briefly almost pleased that Obi-Wan had been suspicious. Because it had led to this. To him accompanying Padmé. To interfering with the results to the point where they were socially acceptable.

Then she shot him a playful smile that had his face mirroring the expression before he even knew what it was about.

"If anyone else knew *me*, they'd know there is literally no one else, human or otherwise, who could have —"

she trailed off in the same way.

But she didn't really pause.

Her flashing eyes found his with serious warmth and didn't let him interrupt as she told him with all her wise and rational heart

"I love you Anakin."

She could have any man she wanted, could be adored and desired and loved by her people. Could live a life in the limelight with heirs who grew to take her place. Yet here she was telling an errant Jedi she loved him for the life of secrecy he'd given her. The children who, by any rationalising that anyone could do, had no choice but to be raised from birth as Jedi.

And she was happy. So happy. He knew it. He knew he made her this way, and his heart fluttered in his chest.

"I love you too," he replied.

She reached up and gave him a soft, warm kiss. Making his lips sing of perfection as he lost everything but the reminder to not drop his daughter. To his Padmé's tender caresses.

"You sealed their birth records with false names, right?" he just wanted to make sure.

Pulling away from her, almost panting. His gaze focused on her lips. Determined to make them glisten with his kisses as he leaned down. She made a soft murmur of assurance that made his world — perfect.

Some weeks later Padmé awoke, blinking sleepily for the barest moment as she tried to work out why she was asleep mid-afternoon. Then she remembered. Anakin returning from a two day mission. Making love when the twins had gone down for their nap. Rolling onto her side with a satisfied grin she tucked her hands up under her head and laid eyes on Anakin. Completely wiped out and right there.

Unable to stop herself she reached out, taking his limp hand in her own and giving it a brief squeeze. He slept on unaware and gleefully she shuffled up to him. She didn't like sleeping on top of him, every time he moved in the slightest it would wake her, but he had no such problems. Taking full advantage she lay her head on his exposed and naked chest and wrapped her arms around him.

He felt good. She was no longer hungry for him, well she wasn't *as* hungry as she'd been before, but that didn't mean she couldn't appreciate the perfection of his body. And for some reason the mere touch of his skin beneath her cheek was satisfying. She lay in quiet silence, reflecting on how much and yet how little their lives had really changed. Their times together were still illicit, snatched where possible. And yet now they could expect those periods to be much longer.

As she silently wondered if it was the ending of the war or the birth of the twins that was keeping him so close to her side, she heard Threepio rapping a quiet signal on the door. Quietly, without disturbing the peaceful slumber of an exhausted Anakin she removed herself from his tantalising body and slipped into her robe to cover up.

"Thank you Threepio," she acknowledged the droid, leaving him to return to whatever he had been doing and making her way into the room next door they'd set up as the new nursery.

It wasn't as perfect as the room on Naboo, but they'd be back there soon. Right now — Padmé's eyes flickered between the twins, finding it was Leia who had woken.

She took her into the living room, and had just finished feeding her young daughter when her bedroom door snapped up and Anakin's tall body lurched outward, palms rubbing at his eyes tiredly.

Padmé grinned quietly at the hastily pulled on pants and the rumpled hair but said nothing. Because the look on his face when he saw Leia softened her heart to jelly.

He came to her side, reaching to taking his princess from her arms then hesitating.

It made Padmé's heart stop. Fear clawed at her and though she knew she was being irrational she had a moment of true panic. Something had happened this time while he was away — she immediately decided. Something that had changed how he would interact with Leia and Luke.

If Anakin's love for their twins had diminished then something was very very wrong because he had been nothing but excited to hold them last time he'd come home, and distraught to be parted from them when it was time to leave.

Just as her mind was really taking off, starting to come up with reasons for his change, Anakin leant down into her arms and raised his left hand to Leia's head, giving her a gentle, lingering kiss on her forehead.

"I'll be right back," he promised the tiny girl.

His head came up a little and, hand still on Leia, his lips hungrily met Padmé's for a brief moment. With confusion Padmé watched Anakin pull away and traipse all the way back to their bedroom.

Ahhhh her mind understood as he came out, tugging at the edge of one his black gloves to tighten the fit.

She didn't approve of the glove. Ever. It made her feel like a barrier was being erected, like he was keeping a part of himself from her. And these fears he had of hurting the twins were baseless as far as she was concerned. Still, she didn't bring it up this time. She simply let Anakin take Leia and left him alone to tend to some documents that had landed on her desk this morning but as yet remained unseen.

"Did you miss me?" Anakin asked his tiny daughter as he sunk into the couch.

Leia stared up at him, and he suddenly had the horrid feeling that he was already the stranger he'd predicted. Luckily, his self-deprecating thoughts of failure at fatherhood were going within moments as Leia reached out her tiny hand and blinked, then started giggling.

With a relieved grin he ran his live fingertips over the tiny soles of her feet.

"Tickles, yeah? Were you good while I was gone?"

He was cradling her very carefully, holding her more to his chest and his lap than the glove but just holding her again felt amazing. He had missed his family, more than he had predicted. His mind had often strayed to them here, growing bigger and forgetting about him. But he had to admit that being back with Obi-Wan, fighting the good fight, destroying Palpatine, helping innocent beings, all that had felt really good. He'd felt useful again, like he had a purpose.

And as Leia's little feet kicked out at him as she laughed, he knew this would all work out. The twins wouldn't forget who he was, and Padmé certainly hadn't. He'd managed to keep their time apart to a minimum, and now it felt all the more special.

With fingers that almost felt comical in size comparison, he counted out a rhyme involving her miniscule toes, bring forth more laughs and a soft feeling of naïve love in the force that made him light up in a grin. Life was certainly settling itself out nicely.

Epilogue

Epilogue

Four Years Later

Clad only in her pyjamas Padmé lounged on the comfortable divan in her parent's drawing room, the early morning sunlight just beginning to stream through the ice-encrusted windows. From the toasty warmth near the fire she watched eagerly as the birthday girl, now four-year old Leia, dug the next present out of her pile.

"I wonder what —" the little girl began her ritual of guessing the contents before she opened her gift.

This time was different. This time she stopped. Mid-sentence. Cocked her head as if listening to something. Turned her eyes towards the wall of all places. Stared thoughtfully for a moment. Then shared a knowing glance with her brother.

Padmé observed the incredibly odd behaviour, quite taken aback.

Suddenly both twins were scrambling to their feet.

"I'd like to go outside," Luke declared.

It stunned the rest of his extended family as both twins immediately headed for the hooks where their cloaks hung.

Padmé shot her sister a look of complete lack of understanding, then hurried to follow them. When she reached the small entranceway both four year olds were already wrapped in thick material.

She eyed the hooks suspiciously. Neither twin would be able to reach. Or even tug them down. What had they done — floated them off the hooks? She didn't want to admit that it was entirely possible they'd done just that.

Still, she retrieved her own cloak and caught up to them as Leia was reaching for the front door controls.

"Now what do you two think you're doing?" she asked, truly intrigued.

They shared a look then Leia repeated "we want to go outside. Please mummy, pleeeassee?"

She sized them both up.

"You're still wearing your pyjamas. And it's freezing. And you haven't finished opening your presents."

They both looked forlornly at the door.

"I want to go outside more than I want my presents," Leia murmured.

Her eyes downcast to the floor like she was apologising.

“Please,” Luke mumbled.

Padmé’s eyes widened as tears started trickling down Luke’s face.

She immediately knelt and pulled him close.

“Lukie, what’s wrong?” she worried.

He turned his eyes to the living room, then looked back to the door and pointed.

“Please?”

She turned and looked to Leia. Tears covered her cheeks too.

“Put your boots on,” she murmured in defeat.

Not understanding at all what this was about. They complied with an immediacy she’d never seen before. And were waiting at the door before she’d even finished with her own shoes.

Padmé wrapped her cloak tightly around herself, dressed completely inappropriately for going outdoors. Beneath it her nightgown was warm against her skin, but the thought of anyone outside seeing her in it was mortifying. Still, she had to find out what was going on with the twins.

She stood above them and pressed the opening panel, watching the door swish up. They had bolted before she could stop them.

In the most curious display she’d ever seen, they dashed out into the snow-covered street, looked left and right for a moment. Then both ran full-pelt for the small side-entrance to the house.

And disappeared entirely from her view. Then she heard it. A simultaneous screech of

“Daddy!!”

She slapped the door panel closed and sped after them. Not even wondering if the rest of her family had heard.

She rounded the corner at top speed. To find both her twins wrapped in the folds of Anakin’s cloak. His tall form kneeling in the snow. Hugging them both to his chest. Both the children were crying, emotionally overwhelmed. And Anakin had a huge grin on his face, as he wished them a happy birthday in his deep familiar voice.

“Anakin,” she couldn’t stop herself from squealing happily.

He was immediately on his feet and in her arms. Taking her in a fierce embrace. Kissing her joyfully.

Padmé could feel the twins clinging to each of Anakin’s legs. She glanced down to see each had taken a handful of his cloak and wrapped it around themselves. Their entire family wrapped in his warmth.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered eagerly.

His mouth pressed back to hers, groaning very quietly.

“It was more important to these two, and to you, than I realised.”

He reached out and caressed her cheek. Said nothing for a moment as he stared deep into her eyes.

“So I took a chance.”

Her heart swelled as her tear ducts did. She slid her hands over his shoulders. Embraced him tightly.

“Anakin,” was the only word she could force out.

He buried his grinning face in her neck for just a moment. Then the demands for attention from his knees became too intense. And so he shifted his gaze down to the little ones.

He gave Padmé another quick kiss, then released her and kneeled again.

“Did you get nice presents for your birthday?” he asked.

Tenderly pushing Leia’s loose curls out of her eyes.

“We’re not finished opening them yet,” Leia informed him with a defiant grin.

He eyed his daughter questioningly for a moment.

“Then why did you come out here?”

There was a long silence as he studied his children. They frowned, shot one another long and questioning looks.

Padmé suddenly let out a small laugh, then knelt down into the snow with them.

“Maybe they knew the best present was out here,” she smiled.

Rubbed her hand over his shoulder. Placed a small kiss on his ear.

“How could they know —?”

Anakin interrupted himself. It suddenly occurred to him just how they knew. They had always heard the force strongly. But to sense him out here they must have actually been listening to the subtle teachings he was slipping into conversations with them. And what was more, they must have practised while he was away.

No, it couldn’t be true. They were far too young. And yet — they were his children.

“Did you feel me out here?” he asked, an incredibly proud grin spreading onto his face.

Even as he asked he knew the answer. He tugged them both to him for a crushing hug.

“Padmé? Is everything alright?” a voice called from the house.

He watched her beautiful lips open and melodically call out “It’s fine! We’ll be inside in a minute.”

“How long can you stay?” her soft voice breathed over his ear.

“A week, maybe two.”

Her eyes widened in glee.

“Jedi Skywalker I was unaware of this threat. But I am grateful such an unobtrusive method of protection for me has been chosen. I would be glad if you would join my family as a friend for my children’s birthday celebrations.”

Padmé’s cover story made him smile. He reached over and kissed her once more.

“Now remember,” Padmé murmured, running her hand through Luke’s soft crop of hair.

“What is daddy’s name when everyone else is around?” she asked her young children softly.

“Anakin,” they answered in unison.

“Exactly. And I’m only mummy’s friend and I never stay the night at home,” he reminded.

They nodded obediently and each took his hand.

Leading him inside to the family who would never know just how important it was to the two young twins that this Jedi had come to spend their birthday with them.

Unwrapping presents had taken a surprisingly short amount of time. In fact, barely half an hour later, with breakfast plates scarcely cleared, the Coruscant-raised twins were desperate to go and play in the oddity that was snow. While their winter-weary relatives warily eyed the cold, wet shifts lining the street.

“I’ll go,” Anakin volunteered.

It took Padmé but a moment to see what he was doing. Seizing the opportunity. Taking the perfectly presented moment to escape with her husband and young vibrant children into the winter wonderland, she smiled with just a hint of falsified exasperation for her parent’s benefit.

“That’s very kind of you Anakin. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

Her tone asked so sweetly, so innocently, that her mother turned to bestow a most grateful “so generous” on Anakin.

“Not at all.”

It took some time for the twins and herself to properly ready. After that the four of them had trekked the few blocks over to a stretch of wilderness that followed the path of the local river. And as soon as they were out of general sight, the world changed. The good friends walking a respectable distance apart moved infinitely closer, each slipping a hand out from beneath long cloaks until lovers’ fingers intertwined. Respectable conversation of a general nature became soft kisses mixed with intimate, teasing banter.

As their children skipped ahead, hiding behind trees and playing with each other, their parents lagged behind at a much more sedate pace. Their foray into the winter wonderland became more of a lover's walk than a backdrop for playing make-believe.

"The day is coming," Anakin thoughtfully mused. "Where I am going to have to make the decision between the twins and Obi-Wan."

Padmé looked up at him with her understated sympathy.

"Is it a choice?" she asked in that tone that couldn't hide that she already knew the answer.

There was a brief pause before he looked down, the crystal clear blue of his eyes silently searching hers.

"No, it's not a choice," he confirmed.

He turned his head away in shame, staring out unseeingly into the lightly wooded forest as they strolled along the wide, majestic path. And in that moment she was for the first time without a solution.

"He'll be so disappointed in me," he sadly murmured. "But even worse, he'll blame himself."

There was silence between them. She always managed to come up with a suitable solution in political arenas, but in this matter of something so precious — Anakin's heart — she was stumped. Maintaining the fundamental tenants of a Jedi life was at the basis of Obi-Wan's self-definition, to say that he had failed to pass that on to his student was to say that he had failed. And yet it was that or his children's future.

"Let's not think about it today," was the wisest council she could offer.

His head bobbed, for a moment more lost in his own mind. Then he released her hand and tugged her closer. Wrapping his arm around her waist and tucking her into his side in an obvious desire for comfort she was only too happy to give.

"Mummy!"

"Daddy!"

Each child yelled for a parent before simultaneously squealing in excitement from somewhere up ahead

"Shaaks!!"

Their return to the house was noisy. The children barrelled in the front door in a blur of colour and motion. While all four of them stomped the snow from their boots and struggled out of extra layers of clothing. Amidst the excited babbling of four-year olds their father knelt, struggling to get them safely out of their cloaks. While their mother attempted to stop their outer garments from ending up in a big wet pile, and hung up on hooks to dry for later.

"Anakin..." Jobal paused.

From his position crouched on the floor, struggling to pull Luke's small boots off, he looked up at her in surprise.

She had quite happily fed him breakfast in the kitchen this morning . And was full of quiet pleasant conversation the handful of other times he'd met her. But she'd never approached him. She'd certainly never sought him out specifically.

And now she was wringing her hands together nervously — as if she were about to say something he wouldn't like.

"We, the family, have been invited to go out to a dinner tonight," she started nervously.

Anakin nodded slowly. Alright, that was simple enough. Did she want him to dress differently? That was the most common complaint he got from civilians.

"It is just family. People we love and trust."

Before she could continue on Anakin glanced behind her shoulder to see Padmé's frowning, then setting her features in fierce determination.

"Anakin is not coming to dinner!" Padmé said loudly, indignantly.

As her mother turned to look at her, Anakin shot her a quick confused look. He hadn't even said anything! Hadn't said he wanted to go, hadn't even argued about it. All he'd done was sit here and politely listen!

"I do not need protection at a private family gathering and I will not stand to have my life so compromised."

Anakin forced himself to look passive as Jobal turned back to him. But then Padmé started nodding frantically in the background. Encouraging him to argue?

"I will not leave you to be exposed for such a period, M'lady," he convincingly disputed.

"There is no threat posed amongst lifelong family friends, your assistance is not required in this instance Master Jedi," she snapped.

Her manner was puzzling him. He couldn't remember her ever dismissing him so bluntly.

"I am here to protect you at all times, not just when it's convenient for you," Anakin said coolly.

Jobal turned back to Padmé. Whose eyes slit in apparent seething rage.

"May I speak with you privately, *Anakin*," she practically spat.

He stood abruptly, leaving Leia and Luke in their grandmother's care and following her from the vestibule into the house. Up into her bedroom where she made sure to slam the door in anger.

Then dropped the act and rounded on him.

"What was that all about?" he asked carefully. "I don't have to go out to dinner. If you're going out and so are your parents I can spend some time with the twins."

"I know," she smiled cleverly.

Her hands came up to caress his cheeks, making him smile. Making his head drop softly.

“Pretend to fight with me,” she said under her breath just as their lips met. “Senator against Jedi, that could take a few hours to resolve.”

Ahhhh. He understood. He waved his hand and heard the small sound of the door lock clicking home.

“Padmé,” came his appreciative whisper.

She kissed him. Her terribly missed, very familiar lips pulling his down hungrily. Abandoning any sense of time or place and letting their hands come up to steady them. With passion that only truly emerged from them when there was no fear of being caught. And they let it consume them for a very long time.

“It has been far too long,” her voice whispered into his ear.

“I know. I’d given up hope of being alone,” he whispered back, stroking her soft hair and shoulders with his fingertips.

Slowly they let it become something more. Anakin eventually falling to the bed, stretching out flat on his back.

Soon enough he lay eagerly waiting beneath her. Her hands caressing and playing with his clothing. About to be with her as he’d been denied for months. Of course her mother would choose that moment to come looking for them.

Wanting to maintain the pretence of fierce argument, Anakin had been keeping his feelings stretched out. So he could sense her when she started up the stairs, and then was moving down the hallway. About to knock and surely interrupt.

“Padmé I do not feel I can assure your safety, leaving you unaccompanied for such a long period of time,” he said slightly louder.

She pulled back and looked at him questioningly. He tucked her hair behind her ears with a small smile, then turned his eyes towards the door. Braced his palms against her back and watched her head turn.

“Oh,” she mouthed to him.

“You are already intruding into my family home. If I succumb to the fear this threat imposes I have fallen prey to the threat itself, and that is something I cannot do,” she said more loudly.

Then she buried her head into his shoulder and slipped herself over him.

He sighed as he could feel himself suddenly inside her once more. Pulling her as close as he could, he looked up into her warm eyes, her hair falling down his cheeks.

“I’m so sorry,” came her whispered voice as they lay still for one moment. “I don’t mean that. You’re not intruding, you belong here.”

They lay together and he let her harsh comments pass as he kissed her quietly.

“Oh Padmé you feel wonderful,” he sighed.

Then he changed his tone and got louder again. Trying to sound like the calm rational Jedi friend. "M'lady it is conceivable your family meal could be a target for just such a reason. Because you think it is safe."

He covered her lips with two fingers, smiling as she started putting butterfly kisses on them. He waited a moment, feeling Jobal leave. Then he pulled Padmé down for a fervent kiss.

"Mmmm, she gone?" came her voice through her soft, occupied lips.

"Hmm," came his positive reply.

Much too engrossed to disengage from her mouth. His fingers digging into her back briefly as she started moving over him.

He let his hands travel the wonders of her bare back. Delighted in her taking control as they were together again. Her hands holding his shoulders down. Her body greedily enveloping him.

And he wasn't her distant Jedi guardian anymore. She wasn't his mission of protection for this month. He was Anakin, who loved her deeply and thought about her constantly. Who shared everything with her, not just the occasional argument over her security arrangements. Who spent months missing her and appreciated their fake disagreement to grab a few precious hours alone in a way no one but her could understand.

She whimpered and he had to force himself to keep his groan low as they shared an intense push.

Whispered words of love started coming from them both. Feelings and sensations much heightened by so much time spent apart.

And with the sudden thought that this may be the only chance he could have to be with her his whole time here, he was suddenly slowing them down and drawing it out. This was going to last.

Anakin suddenly said loudly "No! I will not accept that!"

Padmé shifted sleepily on his chest, a smile curling on her lips.

"This is my life! My family, my home!" she replied perfectly, stifling a yawn at the end by burying her face in the bare skin that lay waiting for her under her cheek.

Anakin chuckled softly, his fingers curling in her hair.

"Not my home, but definitely my family," he whispered to her alone.

He smiled at her as she lifted her head to grin at him. Her head bent down temptingly, and he shot up to give her a lingering kiss.

"Is she gone?" Padmé asked as she sunk back down to his shoulder.

"It's your father and he's still there," came his deliberately quiet reply.

“You will not accompany me this evening. If you wish to make yourself useful you can stay here and protect my children,” Padmé told the door in a calm voice.

Anakin started placing kisses on her shoulders again. Running his hands up and down her soft sides in affectionate caresses.

“Again Ani?” she grinned.

He pulled her close, suddenly swapping their positions to cover her as he enthusiastically whispered “oh yes.”

She grinned up at him in anticipation, cupping his cheeks in her soft palms.

“Do it,” she said softly.

Her legs came up and wrapped around his waist. Moaning gently Anakin reached for one of her thighs. Let his flesh hand caress it tenderly.

He looked at her ever so briefly, then closed his eyes and buried his face in her neck.

“You’re so beautiful Padmé,” he whispered into her skin.

Her hands came up to rest on his back, squeezing two handfuls of his flesh.

“Look at me,” she coaxed, raising her hips.

Their eyes met as he once more disappeared into her softness.

Her groan of his name was intense but well-muffled.

“Oh it feels so good,” came her desperate whimpers in his ear.

She met his eyes and they gazed at one another for a single perfect moment of stillness. Then he rolled his hips and her face lit up for him. She threw her head back and gasped. As he moved over her passionately. Placing irregular open-mouthed kisses wherever he could.

Later that night, the whole house was tucked up in their beds and he’d been banished from his wife’s side to the guest bedroom. Anakin was tugged from a restless sleep by the feeling of one of his children waking. He lay still. Reaching out. Now that they weren’t babies he didn’t need to bother them every time they awoke. And even if they were scared, and needed comforting, they’d want to fall asleep with a parent. And in this house, that couldn’t be him.

With a sigh he stretched his muscles. Waited. Identified his small son clambering out of his bed. He transferred his attentions to Padmé, sent a whisper of caress over her. A silent apology for the boy who would soon drag her from her sleep.

But then he felt Luke stop in the hallway. Right outside the entrance to this spare room. Anakin’s eyes were open and he was staring patiently at the door when Luke finally walked through.

“What’s wrong?” he murmured.

He held out his arms. And Luke made a dash for them, clambering up onto the bed. Two little arms threw themselves around his neck.

“Can I sleep with you?”

Confused, Anakin reached out and brushed against Luke’s mind. There were no lingering remnants of a nightmare. No obvious fear.

But there was a longing. A loneliness. Startled, Anakin realised he was observing the same distress he felt when he was away from his family.

He wrapped his arms around his little prince.

“Of course you can sleep with me.”

The two of them lay down and Luke curled happily into his side. But as soon as the lights dimmed once more, sleep seemed to elude the younger Skywalker.

He started whispering over-dramatically. Things he would never be able to say around his grandparents and cousins and aunt and uncle without getting all of them into a lot of trouble.

“I can feel you,” was the first decided announcement.

Anakin looked down at Luke with a grin. Brushed his fingers over Luke’s forehead.

“Here?” he asked quietly.

Luke nodded. Tiny fingers came up and rested over his heart.

“And here too,” he confided.

“Do you just feel me?”

Luke shook his head.

“Leia too. And —” he paused. “Mummy too, but not the same.”

Anakin grinned and gave Luke a squeeze.

“No, she feels different,” he agreed with his son.

“It’s harder to feel her. She’s not as — strong.”

Anakin wouldn’t know about that. He almost fed off Padmé’s force presence it was so strong in his life. She definitely wasn’t Jedi material but being around her almost blinded Anakin to anything else in sight.

Still, Luke hadn’t spent most of his life longing for the soothing waves of energy Padmé emitted.

“Who else do you feel?”

Luke suddenly reached out and pointed his finger at where Anakin’s lower rib lay still healing beneath his shirt.

“You’re hurt here,” he informed his father.

Anakin looked down, surprised. He covered his hand over the injury he hadn’t even confided in Padmé about.

“Yes,” he confirmed.

He eyed his little prince in awe.

“How did you get it?”

“In a battle,” Anakin told the truth.

Then he paused. Looked towards the door. Leia was awake. Probably sensing that her brother was gone. But she took the path to Padmé’s bed and Anakin returning his attention to Luke.

“Is it sore?”

Anakin nodded.

There was a long period of silence, blue eyes constantly searching his own. Eventually they started to drift closed and Anakin too settled down to sleep. Until he heard

“Daddy?”

“Hmmm?”

“Can I have a brother?”

Anakin was sure his heart literally skipped a beat. His mind filled with images of making love to Padmé. Followed by NOT making love to Padmé for what felt like years as she recovered from the twins. And the sense of loss he felt when he was away from them now. No way was he going to bring another child into that equation.

“W — why?” he questioned.

“I want a boy to play with.”

“You have me.”

“Not all the time though.”

Just as Anakin was falling to pieces the door to his bedroom flew up and Padmé dashed in. Anxious with a physical tenseness that screamed worry.

“Anakin I can’t find Luke.”

He rolled onto his back to study her and the small boy emerged from the shadow of his side.

“I’m here,” Luke greeted Padmé with a smile.

Padmé paused for a moment. Leia appeared behind her, clinging to her skirt. Almost frightened.

Padmé softened at the sight of her two boys. Leia’s worry had been so overwhelming she hadn’t even been thinking straight. Anakin’s fake assignment had almost seemed real for a moment. Like someone could have actually kidnapped Luke to try and hurt her.

But here he was. Tucked up beside Anakin. Where she herself would most like to be.

With a relaxing grin, she shifted her weight to the other foot.

An image quickly formed in her mind.

“Well, since you and Leia are both up, why don’t you come lie in my bed? It’s bigger.”

“Daddy too?” Leia begged by her side.

She smirked at Anakin.

“Yes. But we all have to be very quiet.”

The twins nodded and, jumping from the bed, made a dash for Padmé’s room.

Anakin stood more slowly. Taking the time to capture her in his arms.

And her mouth with his. Padmé groaned quietly and pulled her younger husband closer. His large hands tenderly caressed her back, bringing her body to life. She felt like a fire had been lit under her, when he tried to pull away for breath and she dived in deeper, refusing to release him.

Just having him back with her, even though they had to hide again, was so fulfilling. His entertaining conversation over lunch had her laughing until tears had fallen from her eyes. The way his hand had quietly slipped into hers when they were out walking with the twins in the afternoon had reminded her what life was.

Their kisses became more passionate as Anakin gently pushed her up against the wall and made her feel so incredibly loved. Began to arouse her very slowly with his hands.

Then a small noise interrupted them. Giggling.

“We’d better get back to them before they wake the whole house,” she murmured.

Before they totally pulled apart she nibbled on his lips for a few seconds more.

“Mmm,” came his soft voice.

When they disengaged for good there was no regret. He slipped his arm around her waist and they quietly walked into her bedroom, sharing smiles of contentment. In a highly familiar scene, Luke and Leia were already giggling with each other as they lay with the blankets pulled up to their chins, waiting.

“I want to sleep next to daddy!” they both declared simultaneously.

“Shhh,” Padmé hushed, already seeing an argument coming.

The twins scrambled to flank him as he climbed into bed beside them, shooting Padmé an amused smile.

“Ok, settle down,” Anakin murmured.

He let each twin curl up under an arm by each of his sides. Turning his head from side to side, he kissed each of their foreheads in turn.

“Goodnight my princess, goodnight my prince.”

Anakin's head turned to meet Padmé's eyes. She smiled longingly at him, tugging her pillow closer. Making it clear that of all the members of their family who wanted to sleep on his chest, she desired the feeling of him the most.

"Goodnight my queen," he whispered, watching her intently.

The sincerity in his gaze meant she couldn't hold herself back. Padmé propelled herself up and leaned over Leia who lay between them. She pressed her mouth back into his, dipping deep in to taste him. Along her neck she felt him free Luke for a moment, and press his hand into her. His live fingertips brushing against her eagerly.

"Goodnight," she smiled lusciously.

She returned to her position and settled into her pillow with a deliberate slowness. Feeling Anakin's eyes never leaving her. Hungry for her. She could almost feel the promise of his love in the near future. She grinned longingly at him but shrugged. It couldn't happen now, no matter how much they wanted it.

Grinning in defeat he tucked Luke's small wiry body back under his arm. Let his eyes linger on her until he seemed to drift off.

Anakin woke to the movement of soft hair under his chin. He cracked an eye open, watching as untamed dark curls bounced in the corner of his vision. Leia murmured something in her sleep and nuzzled into him deeper. Grinning, he squeezed her close and pressed a kiss into her hair. Curious he rolled his head to the other side. Fine, almost white blond hair was the only sign of the little boy buried under his arm. He almost wanted to laugh at the pair of them, both so cute with the sweet innocent way they loved him. He gave Luke's head a brief kiss too, stroking his thumb over the little arm he could feel pressed into his hand under the cover.

"Daddy? Can we make a snowman?"

Anakin watched in surprise as the light mop of hair raised up to reveal a familiar face.

"What, now?" he whispered.

Luke nodded.

Anakin looked at the bedroom window suspiciously. It was barely past dawn and if the frost on the glass was anything to go by, it wasn't very hospitable outside.

"It's still cold Lukie."

For effect Luke shivered and tugged Anakin's arm tighter around him. Without even thinking Anakin released Leia for a moment, tugged up the blankets tighter to Luke's chin.

"Go back to sleep. You were up late last night," he tried to distract Luke.

"I want to make a snowman," Luke quietly complained. "It's my birrrthday."

In truth he was already settling himself back down to sleep. Anakin gave him a smile and a quiet promise of "we will in a little while." Knowing that there was definite time with Anakin

in the near future seemed to help and Luke collapsed back into stillness.

Enjoying the silence he turned his head and pulled his daughter close again. His heart swelled as his eyes fell on an almost continuous carpet of curls. Padmé's large loose swirls blending into Leia's ringlets as they lay side by side.

Padmé was facing away from him but his eyes travelled over what little of her he could see. Admiring every line, curve, bump, corner of her tucked up form. He briefly rolled his eyes, knowing that if the twins had slept in their own beds he would have been able to ravish her into wakefulness. A warm nightgown fabric covered her arms but he could visually trace the line of each of her slim fingers, splayed out on the blanket. That small sight alone was enough to make him shiver.

The next evening found Sola's family just returned home and Padmé's parents out at a friend's home for dinner. Leaving the Skywalker family tucked up in the cozy living room. Quietly watching a popular fictional children's story unfold on the holo before them.

Luke and Leia had claimed the floor, their little legs absently kicking back and forth as they eagerly watched.

Their parents were less engaged in the plot. For Anakin it was hard to think of anything when he was so relaxed. Stretched out with his head in Padmé's lap. Almost dozing as she ran her loving fingers through the waves of his hair.

The only thing to bring him to wakefulness was Padmé, leaning down and putting her lips near to his ear.

"When they've fallen asleep we'll take them back to bed. You can lie in my bed for a little longer," she offered.

Anakin's eyes lazily opened to gaze up at the wondrous sight that was his wife — more beautiful now than when he first saw her. It crossed his mind that actually it might continue like this forever. Padmé would be more glorious every time he set eyes on her. If that was true, then he had much to look forward to as she flushed into the full bloom of womanhood.

"How long have you been here?" he asked quietly, studying the golden flecks of love in her dark, soulful eyes.

"With my parents? Three weeks."

"Could we take the twins and go somewhere else? The lake country? I don't want to be your bodyguard Padmé, I want to be your husband."

"Of course."

Her fingers danced up, tracing across his forehead.

"I'll make the arrangements tonight, we can leave tomorrow."

Anakin took a deep breath, released it. And revealed his final decision.

"For the next few years — I think that's all I'll be."

He captured her hand and tugged it down. Turned his cheek into her palm. Looked up at her with all the meaning made clear in his eyes. Their family could not be revealed in the light of day, could not be brought out into the light. Not until their children were fully grown. And they're starting to truly be shaped as little beings — he can no longer be absent.

He doesn't *want* to be absent. He wants to help them become who they're going to become. He wants to be a father.

He wants to be a husband.

He wants Padmé.

They may have other children, they may not. But until every offspring he's sired is far too old to be considered for Jedi training, which considering his own acceptance may have to be as far away as their late teens, he won't return to the Order.

"Leaving the Order is... complicated," Padmé warned, admitting in the same breath that she had put some study into the subject.

She looked at him worriedly, and he knew it was for himself that she was concerned. He considered her taught features for a moment, thinking of the grief his formal parting would heap on her — the woman who brought about the ruination of a sacrosanct Jedi. Then he momentarily glanced toward his innocent children. The ones who would be immediately seconded to the order.

"I won't leave. I'll just disappear," he whispered. "I will send a message to Obi-Wan, and watch out for him from a distance. I'll help people in my own way."

"Will you miss the thrill, the sense of achievement of helping to shape the course of the galaxy though?"

Turning his head slightly, he fluttered a kiss on her palm.

"Every day I will touch you, *see you*. I will return to the Jedi in the future but if there's one thing they've taught me, it's that with power comes responsibility. That lesson is the first I learnt. They mean it on a grander scale of course, to be careful when shaping civilisations."

He twisted onto his side, raised a hand and caressed as he kissed her flat abdomen.

"There is other power though. Other responsibilities."

Anakin was alluding to the power of fatherhood — of marriage and familial responsibility. And without having to say another word, Padmé understood. The kindness in her eyes told him that she also knew he was making the choice that would make him the happiest.

That would fulfil his soul.

When they return to Coruscant a month later it is Anakin who draws his cowl up, carefully obscuring his features in the darkness of his cloak. He doesn't return to the Jedi temple, he follows the balls of energy and light that make up his existence with cries of "Daddy! Daddy!" as they cling tightly to his hands. His mind projects forward to just what he'll be doing once they return home. His eyes dance to Padmé and the skin-tight flight-suit she's wearing, her features intent on her chief of staff. His body can't help but jump in anticipation at the arousing image of being tangled up with her. In his chest his heart pitter-patters a little

louder at the prospect. He aches to be with her, and knows that soon he will be. Because now — he never has to wait, be denied. Now, he feels free to love her, take her. He can finally stop denying the strongest pull in his heart.

Now that he has made his choice, he is overjoyed — even though he is the one who will be hidden.

The End

Author's Note: Hey to all the beautiful people who've read all the way to the end! This has been a megawork on my part — and one of the few pieces of fiction I've ever gotten around to finishing. Before *Revenge of the Sith* I was a Star Wars liker but not a Star Wars Fan. Then I saw *ROTS* and couldn't sleep, horrified with the idea that, for Anakin and Padmé, that was it, he'd never get to say he was sorry, or express his obviously deep feelings for her again.

So I started *Hidden*. And here we are, almost three years later.

I have a nasty habit of being swayed by reviews, where thoughtful readers who've become involved in the plot make suggestions for future events. Unfortunately this clashing of their imagination with my own ideas, tends to stunt my creativity and I can go for months without the words coming onto the page correctly. So I stopped reading chapter reviews for *Hidden* and I've saved them all up in my inbox. I've just glugged myself and can I just say

THANK YOU!

Wow! So many honest messages of encouragement and support for the story — it's unbelievable! Also a handful of strange comments but it's a big big world out there and we're all entitled to our own opinions.

I try to write for myself — getting the fantasies I come up with when I'm bored onto paper (laptop) for my own amusement. Most of them never make it off my hdd. But the many many reviews I've received for *Hidden* are more than I ever expected or could have wished for and I'm stunned. Grateful.

To those who have taken the time to read and review — I appreciate it more than you could ever know.

To those who have read but didn't review — that's ok! Sometimes I read other people's work well into the night because I get caught up in the narrative, then find myself too tired to do anything except fall asleep and dream about another writer's world. I just hope you enjoyed my little fic — after all, you can be like this alternative version of Anakin — one who's very much content to stay *Hidden*!

Best wishes to All

Disco Shop Girl

Sunday 15th June 2008